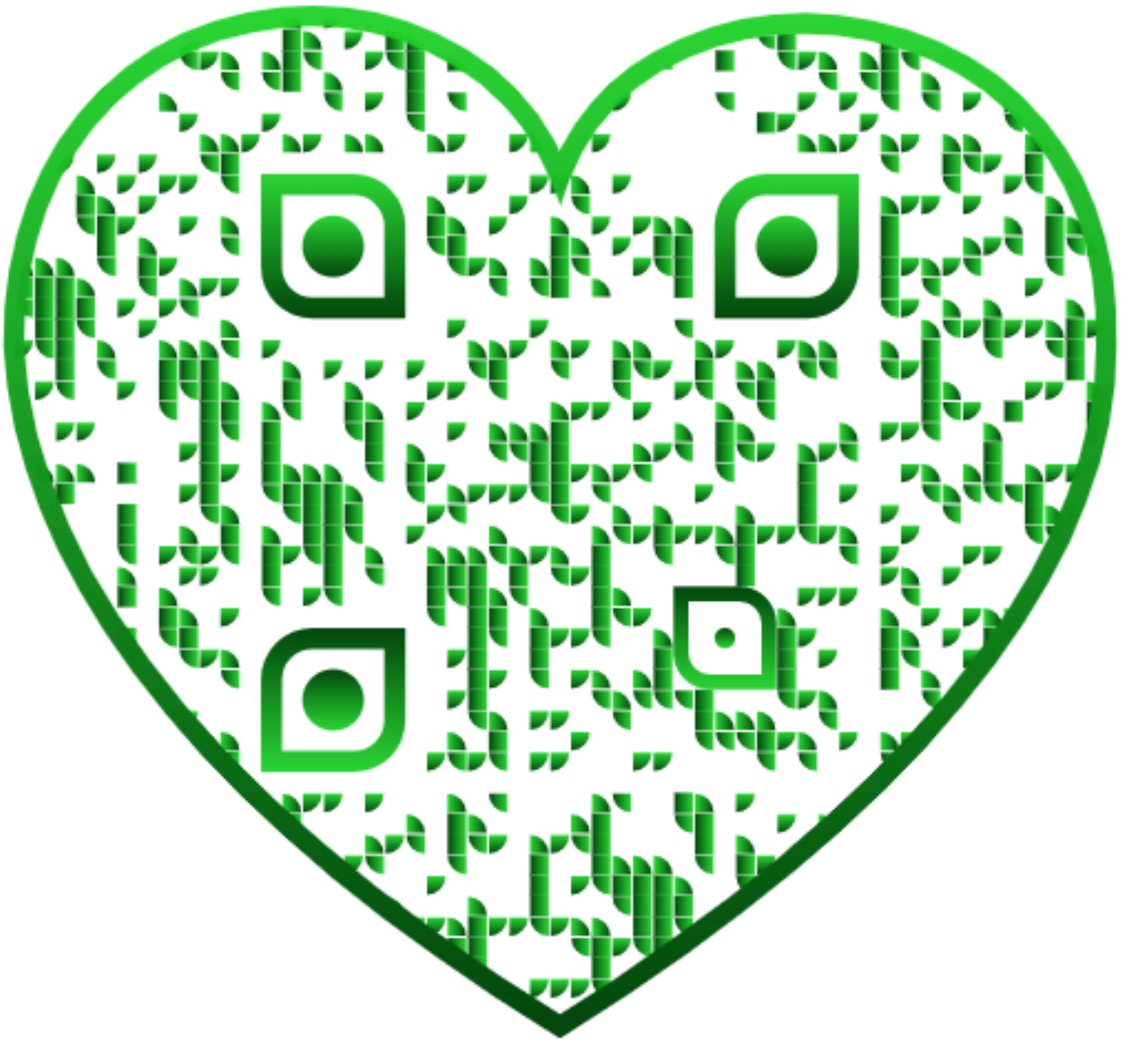
ICONS & INFLUENCES

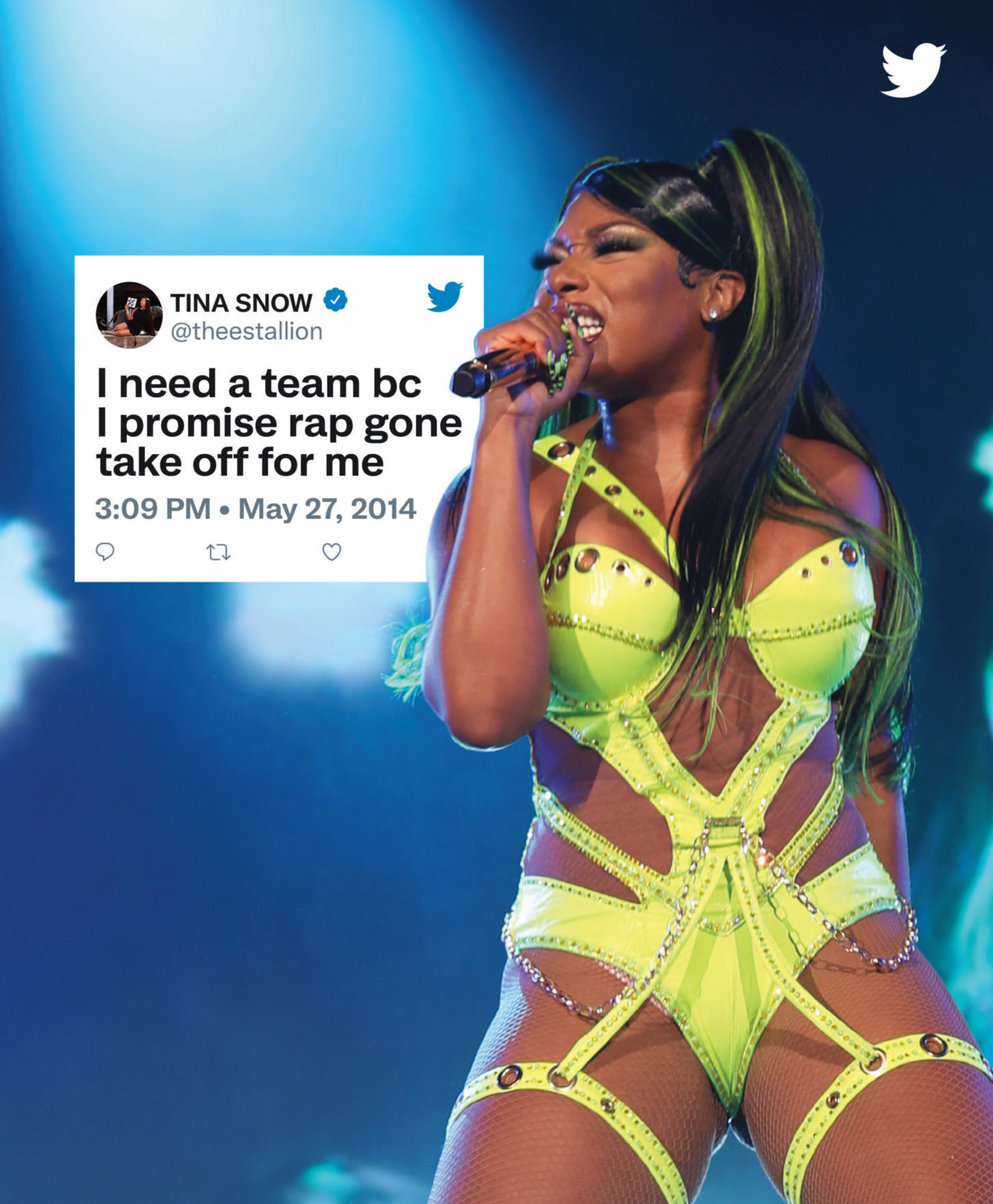
Rolling Stone

MARCH 2022
ISSUE 1361

Jennifer Lopez

How She Broke All the Rules to Get to the Top




TINA SNOW
@theestallion
I need a team bc
I promise rap gone
take off for me
3:09 PM • May 27, 2014

Contents

ISSUE 1361
'ALL THE NEWS THAT FITS'

ICONS & INFLUENCES

Celebrating the women who have changed the way we live, think, watch, and hear now

26
Jennifer Lopez
How the Bronx-born striver broke all the rules to get to the top.
By Alex Morris

34
Portraits
A fearless film producer, a guardian of Afro-Colombian musical tradition, and an electrifying film and TV star.

42
Tributes
Ten of today's leading artists on the pioneering women who have shaped their sound and inspired them.

"She makes what she needs to make, when she needs to make it."
SYD ON ERYKAH BADU

MARC BAPTISTE/CORBIS/GETTY IMAGES

Contents

16

Features

52 **Nothing Could Silence Ronnie Spector**
Remembering her strength, resilience, and that legendary voice.
BY ROB SHEFFIELD

56 **Meat Loaf's Pain and Pathos**
The final testament of rock's biggest underdog.
BY ANDY GREENE AND ERIK HEDEGAARD

60 **1,200 Tons of Chemical Weapons, Nine Months to Destroy Them All**
How four women you've never heard of helped avert a global crisis and saved untold lives.
BY TESSA STUART

The Mix

11 **Earthgang Float Above the Chaos**
The rap experimentalists find something stronger than fear on their new LP.
BY JEFF IHAZA

SPOTLIGHT
16 **Sasami's Music for Soft Souls**
How metal riffs and rage unlocked her potential.
BY JON BLISTEIN

18 **RS Audio Awards**
The best new audio tech for audiophiles, gamers, and everyday listeners.

Q&A
20 **Charli XCX**
The pop star on her evil alter ego and why she won't be watching her new documentary again.
BY BRITTANY SPANOS

National Affairs

22 **Laboratory for Autocracy**
How Wisconsin became ground zero for Donald Trump and the radical right's plot to steal the next election.
BY ANDY KROLL

52

74

Reviews

Music

69 **Maren Morris Finds a New Road**
The eclectic Nashville star pushes against her own brand on her third album.
BY JONATHAN BERNSTEIN

ALBUM GUIDE
72 **The Weeknd**
How Toronto's moody Lothario grew from an avant-R&B artist with a cult of fans to a pop superstar.
BY WILL DUKES

TV

74 **'Atlanta' Returns**
Donald Glover's hit show is back with a new season, and boy have we missed it.
BY ALAN SEPINWALL

75 **'Minx' Debuts**
Alan Sepinwall reviews HBO Max's new show. Plus: Hulu's *The Dropout*.

76 **Movies**
Why We Need Another Batman
The Caped Crusader wrote the book on damaged superheroes — which is why he makes sense now more than ever.
BY DAVID FEAR

Departments

Opening Act 8
RS Recommends 14
The Last Word 82

On the Cover

Jennifer Lopez photographed in Los Angeles on Dec. 13, 2021, by **Chrisean Rose**.

Fashion direction by Alex Badia. Produced by Brittany Brooks. Hair by Chris Appleton at the Wall Group. Makeup by Mary Phillips. Nails by Tom Bachik at A-Frame Agency. Tailoring by Mia Paranto. Styling by Rob & Mariel at Forward Artists. Suit by Balmain. Cuffs by Tiffany's. Earrings by Jennifer Fisher. Set design by Carlos Lopez at Winston Studios.

FROM TOP: DANIEL TOPETE; MATTHIAS CLAMER/FX; CHRIS WALTER/WIREIMAGE

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ROLLING STONE (ISSN 0035-791x) is published 12 times per year, which is subject to change at any time, by Penske Business Media, LLC, 475 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10017. Periodicals postage paid at New York, NY, and additional mailing offices. Postmaster: Send address changes to ROLLING STONE Customer Service, P.O. Box 37505, Boone, IA 50037-0505. Canadian Postmaster: Send address changes and returns to P.O. Box 63, Malton CFC, Mississauga, Ontario L4T3B5. Canada Poste publication agreement #40683192. International Publications Mail Sales Product Agreement No. 450553.

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Opening Act

Look Sharp! Here Comes Wet Leg

RHIAN TEASDALE AND HESTER CHAMBERS don't take themselves too seriously — even the name of their band, Wet Leg, came from combining random emojis on a keyboard. "It's a really good way to find band names," confirms Chambers, 27. With songs that drip in post-punk riffs and witty sexual innuendos, the U.K. duo are one of the year's buzziest acts. At a recent show in Brooklyn, fans screamed along to "Chaise Longue," which they wrote over Christmas 2019, freestyling *Mean Girls* references ("Would you like us to assign someone to butter your muffin?") and a call-and-response of "Excuse me?" and "What?" Teasdale, 28, explains their chemistry with typical sarcasm: "It takes a lot of effort to look this chill." ANGIE MARTOCCIO

Chambers (left) and Teasdale at Brooklyn's Union Pool

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Earthgang Float Above the Chaos

Two years into a pandemic, the Atlanta rap experimentalists find something stronger than fear

PHOTOGRAPHS BY **Jordan Payne**

PHOTOGRAPHED ON LOCATION AT BLUE SOUTH RECORDING STUDIOS IN ATLANTA

EARTHGANG

Olu

THE TWO ATLANTA rappers in Earthgang know their music has a tendency to cover a lot of ground. So this year, Olu (a.k.a. Johnny Venus) and WowGr8 (born Eian Parker) – the duo who have spent the past few years reinventing Southern rap at a pace as dizzying as it's been dazzling – decided to give listeners a road map to their next project. It started with shooting a sequence of five music videos to get across the sounds and themes of their second major-label album, *Ghetto Gods*. "We're so creative, and we have so many great ideas and so many great stories to tell," Olu, 32, explains over Zoom. "We feel like it would be to our betterment that we put it in forms where people are able to digest it."

The pair's full-length major-label debut, 2019's *Mirrorland*, presented a kaleidoscopic view of Black life in Atlanta. Inspired by *The Wiz* – the 1978 *Wizard of Oz* adaptation starring an ensemble cast of Black icons – that album's tone was decidedly whimsical. "I love that word in any context," says WowGr8, 31. "That shit was *whimsical*. It's not like our lives was necessarily better or easier, but it was prepandemic. It was big optimism for the follow-up tour for that."

Now, with *Ghetto Gods*, optimism has made way for something more resilient. It's easy to feel hopeful about the future when times are good, but it's something special to have faith in times like these. "We know where we're from," Olu says. "We see the effect the pandemic has had on our neighborhoods. But we also see the beauty and the ingenuity and creativity that people have been able to foster from this shit."

WowGr8

The album retains Earthgang's flair for the theatric, with skits that break the record into episodic sections. There's high drama in the album-opening title track, which begins with triumphant horns and builds toward Olu singing "Tell me that heaven ain't Black" with an urgent and guttural whisper. Elsewhere, on the Future-assisted "Billi," the group's talent for collaboration gets to shine through. The song's drums hit like boulders bouncing on top of Jell-O, with Olu and WowGr8 each upping the ante in their vocal heroics.

On "Power," they join forces with CeeLo Green and Nick Cannon ("My dog," Olu says of the *Masked Singer* host) to provide what feels like a raison d'être for the entire project: declaring independence from the systems that might want to contain what it is that Earthgang has set out to do. Both CeeLo and Cannon deliver, offering up tales of resilience that cut through with honesty. "There's shit that we can never say that CeeLo can say, because we haven't even seen shit from a whole different era," WowGr8 says. "When he said, 'I done been in the room/Watched others bend and assume,' I was like, 'Damn, bro.' "

For Earthgang, this latest album was about reconnecting to the world and feeling closeness through music. Olu recalls their first in-person meeting with famed Atlanta record-business veteran Kawan Prather, known for his close work with the Dungeon Family. Prather, who served as *Ghetto Gods*' executive producer, asked Olu and WowGr8 to think of the songs from their debut that got audiences the most excited at their shows. "We realized that the energy of these songs is what we want to go towards," Olu says. "Then, once we started listening back to the records, we were seeing this underlying theme about the present moment. We was like, 'OK, we're talking about us finding our light in this wild-ass situation.'"

FAST FACTS

SPIRITUAL SEEKERS
One of Earthgang's guiding philosophies is looking for magic in the mundane. "Every day, we see God move through somebody, anywhere in the world," says WowGr8.

HIGHER LEARNING
Olu and WowGr8 met as students at Hampton University, an HBCU in Virginia.

COME TOGETHER
Other key members of Spillage Village include quick-talking rapper JID, producers Hollywood JB and Benji, neo-soul singer Mereba, and R&B star 6lack.

Earthgang sees these themes as a continuation of their work on *Spilligion*, a far-reaching exploration of faith and spirituality in Black culture that they released in the fall of 2020 with their peers in the Spillage Village collective. "*Spilligion* is reflective of when you first experienced the pandemic. I'm talking about the end of days," WowGr8 says. "That's what a lot of people felt in the beginning. It was a lot of uncertainty. Then, it's being at peace with yourself and comfortable with the known unknown." And now? WowGr8 continues that the music on *Ghetto Gods* represents "motherfucking absolute certainty." The two years of the pandemic have fostered something stronger than fear.

Earthgang have frequently seen comparison to Outkast – but while both acts have sought to expand the boundaries of hip-hop, and both feature two members who rap with distinct styles, the parallels fade after that. Earthgang make music that pushes through the noise of a new generation, weighed down by a ceaseless cascade of information.

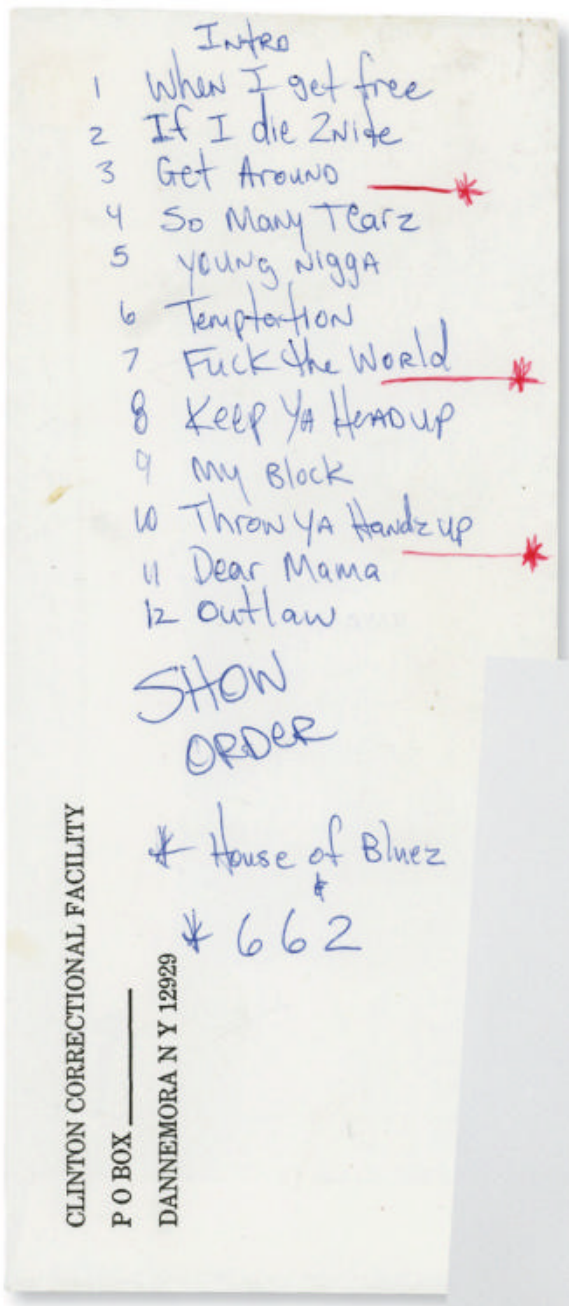
Both Olu and WowGr8 put great stock in the idea of connection as a means of survival. "It's straight-up honesty," Olu says. He points to "Strong Friends," a warmhearted track toward the album's close, as one of his favorites. The song is about checking in on loved ones, since you can never know what someone's going through unless you ask.

"It's really just talking about the ability and the strength to open up and to be honest, no matter what anybody says or how they respond to your truth," Olu says. "It's an unburdening of yourself." JEFF IHAZA

EXHIBIT

A Rap Icon's Unseen Archive

TUPAC SHAKUR WAS more than just one of the most influential rappers of the Nineties. He was also a poet and activist who became one of his era's most revolutionary voices. The new exhibit *Tupac Shakur: Wake Me When I'm Free* showcases those aspects of his life in a stunning, immersive display of handwritten poems, song lyrics, previously unseen photographs, and more. "Hopefully, people are feeling that they have a one-on-one experience with Tupac as they go through this, and they walk away feeling a lot more inspired," says Jeremy Hodges, the exhibit's creative director. "But more importantly, I want them to love this man for who he was and what he was fighting for." **ANDY GREENE**


Intro
1 When I get free
2 If I die 2Nite
3 Get Around *
4 So Many Tearz
5 young Nigga
6 Temptation
7 Fuck the World *
8 Keep Ya Head up
9 my Block
10 Throw Ya Handz up
11 Dear Mama *
12 outlaw
SHOW ORDER
* House of Blues *
* 662
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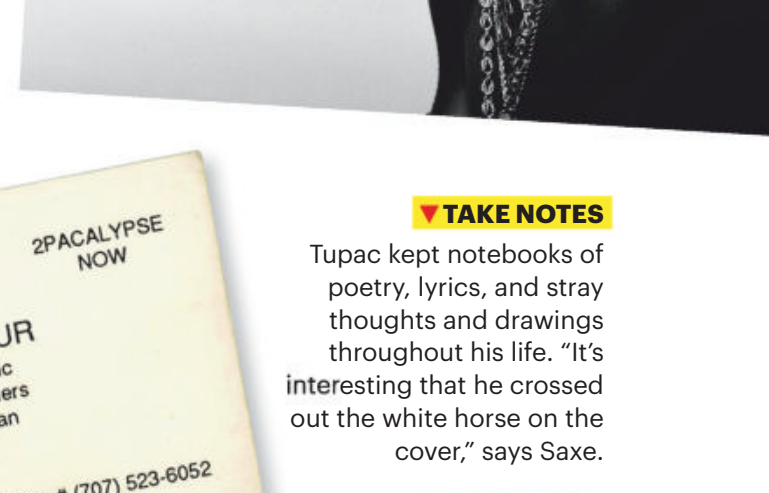
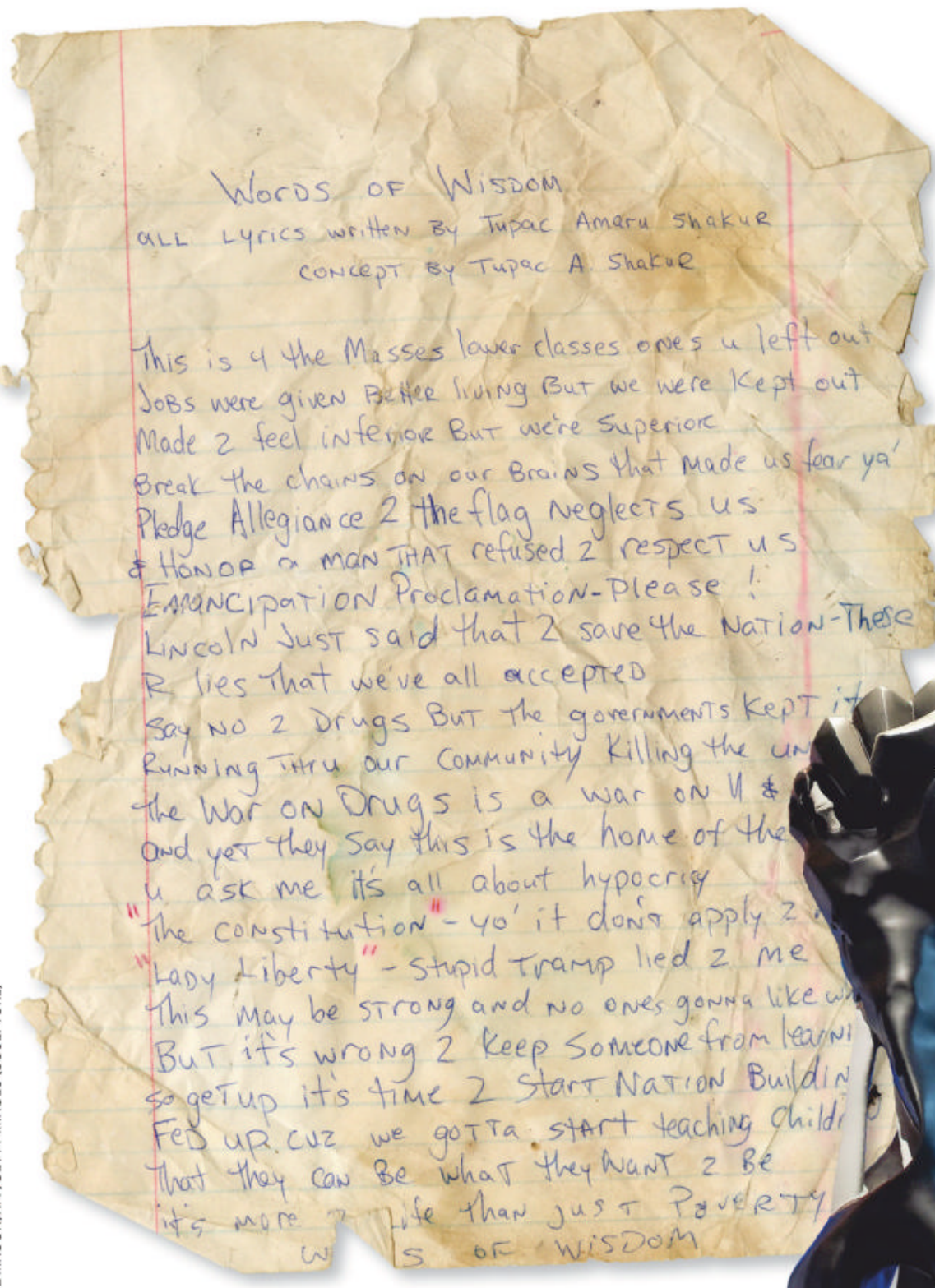
◀ JAILHOUSE DREAMS

In 1995, Tupac served nine months in prison for sexual assault. While there, he wrote out this set list for a planned show at the L.A. House of Blues.

▼ 2PACALYPSE NOW

A 1992 photograph of Shakur by Jeffery Newbury. "He was just 25 when he died," says Saxe. "It's pretty stunning to look at how much he created in that time."




Words of Wisdom
ALL Lyrics written By Tupac Amaru Shakur
CONCEPT By Tupac A. Shakur

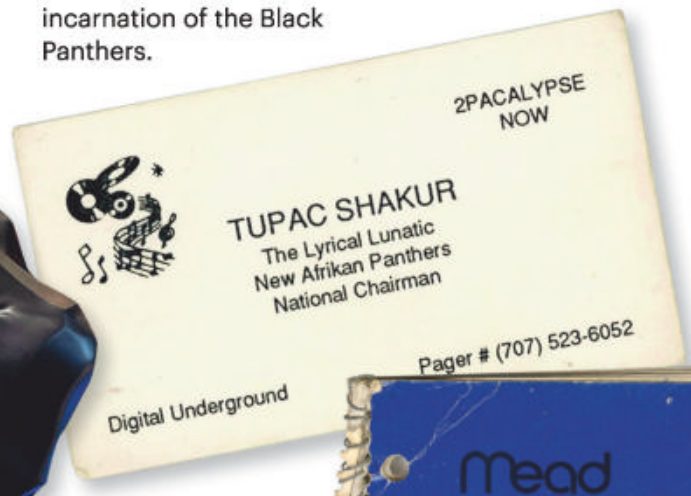
This is 4 the Masses lower classes ones u left out
JoBS were given Better living But we were Kept out
Made 2 feel inferior But we're Superior
Break the chains on our Brains that made us fear ya'
Pledge Allegiance 2 the flag Neglects us
& HONOR a MAN THAT refused 2 respect us
EMANCIPATION Proclamation-Please !
LINCOLN JUST said that 2 save the NATION-These
R lies that we've all accepted
Say NO 2 Drugs But the governments Kept it
RUNNING THRU our COMMUNITY Killing the UN
the War ON Drugs is a war ON U &
And yet they Say this is the home of the
U ask me it's all about hypocrisy
"The CONSTITUTION" - yo' it don't apply 2
"LADY Liberty" - Stupid Tramp lied 2 me
This May be STRONG and NO ones gonna like
But it's wrong 2 Keep Someone from learni
so getUp it's time 2 Start NATION Buildin
FED UP. CUZ we gOTTa START teaching Childr
that they can Be what they WANT 2 Be
it's more to life than JUST POVERTY
WORDS OF WISDOM

▲ WORDS OF WISDOM

This handwritten poem is one of hundreds of pages that have rarely been seen by the public. "He is looking out the window and reporting the news," says Aaron Saxe, co-producer of the exhibit. "That's what hip-hop was at that time, and continues to be today."

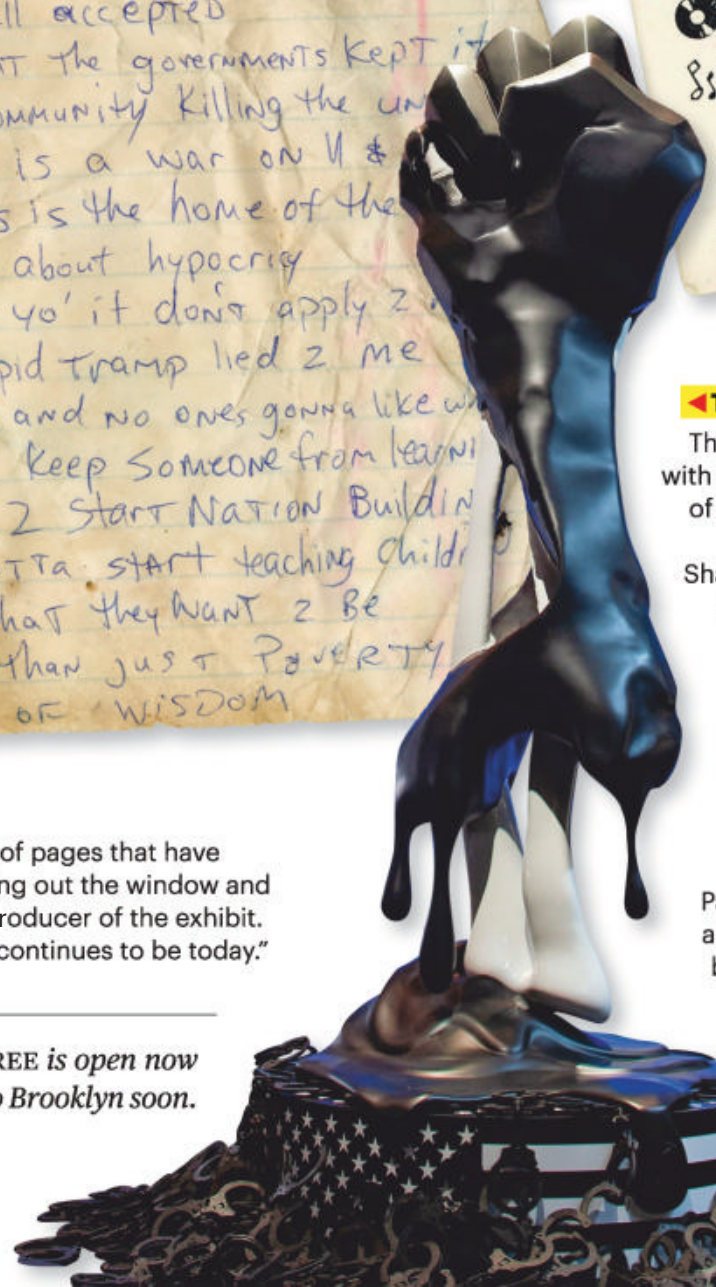
▼ AMBITIONZ

This early business card shows Tupac's work with the Bay Area rap group Digital Underground and a new incarnation of the Black Panthers.


2PACALYPSE NOW
TUPAC SHAKUR
The Lyrical Lunatic
New Afrikan Panthers
National Chairman
Pager # (707) 523-6052
Digital Underground

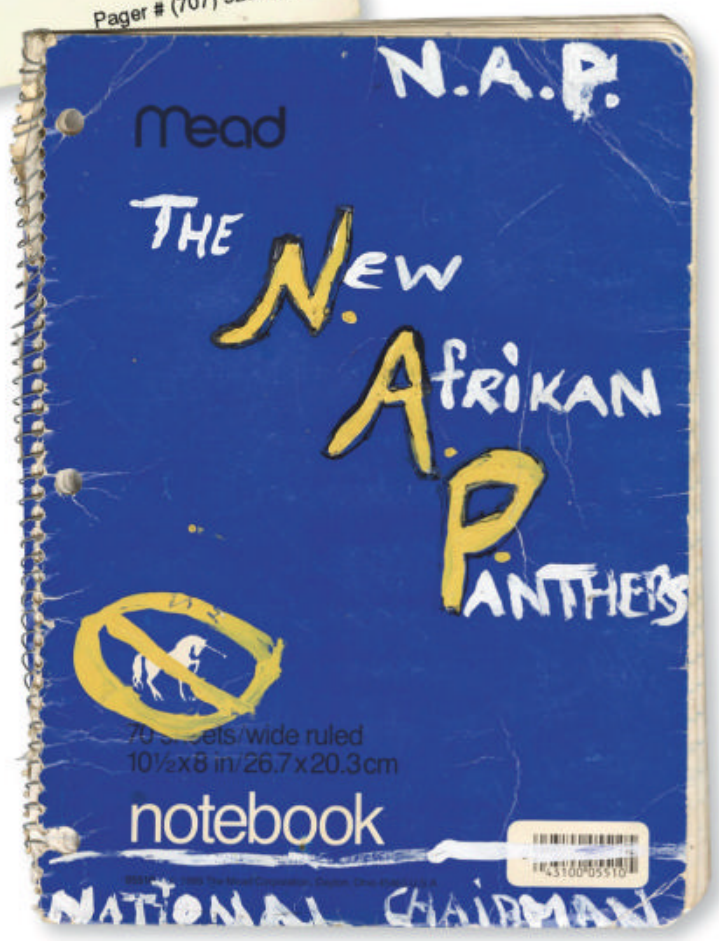
▼ TAKE NOTES

Tupac kept notebooks of poetry, lyrics, and stray thoughts and drawings throughout his life. "It's interesting that he crossed out the white horse on the cover," says Saxe.



◀ THE STRUGGLE

The exhibit begins with a look at the life of Tupac's mother, activist Afeni Shakur. This statue is more than 10 feet high. The 300 handcuffs at the base represent the number of years in prison that Afeni and 20 other Black Panthers faced in a 1971 trial before being acquitted.


Mead
N.A.P.
THE NEW AFRIKAN PANTHERS
notebook
NATIONAL CHAIRMAN

TUPAC SHAKUR: WAKE ME WHEN I'M FREE is open now at L.A. Live in Los Angeles, and headed to Brooklyn soon.

COURTESY OF THE COLLECTION OF THE SHAKUR ESTATE, 4 (ITEMS); JEFFERY NEWBURY/© AMARU ENTERTAINMENT INC. (PORTRAIT). VALERIE MACON/AFP/GETTY IMAGES (SCULPTURE)

RS RECOMMENDS

OUR TOP POP-CULTURE PICKS OF THE MONTH

ALBUM

1. Stromae's 'Multitude'

Laced with experimental sounds from all over the world, this LP marks the Belgian singer's return to music after eight years. With tracks like "Santé," a tribute to overlooked workers, it's a lyrical collage inspired by everyday people.

FILM

2. 'Everything Everywhere All at Once'

Michelle Yeoh plays a dry cleaner taking on an evil tax auditor (Jamie Lee Curtis) with the help of alternate-timeline versions of herself. From A24 and the Daniels, the directors of Lil Jon's WTF video "Turn Down for What."

BOOK

3. 'Jean-Michel Basquiat: King Pleasure'

In tandem with an upcoming NYC exhibition of the same name, this book offers exclusive art, as well as anecdotes from the late artist's family, reliving the influences of his early life with this intimate volume.

TOUR

4. Jawbreaker

This spring, post-hardcore firebrands Jawbreaker will play the entirety of 1995's *Dear You* LP — Number Four on RS's "40 Greatest Emo Albums of All Time" — to commemorate its 25th anniversary. ("The last two years don't count," the band joked.)

WEB COMIC

5. HYBE Original Webtoons

Original-comic site Webtoon partnered with K-pop agency HYBE to produce three series — from BTS, Enhypen, and Tomorrow X Together — morphing the stars of the bands into crime-fighting heroes.

DOCUSERIES

6. 'The Andy Warhol Diaries'

Warhol invented the modern notion of celebrity, but his life was surprisingly private. This six-part Ryan Murphy-produced Netflix series uses his own words and recordings — along with interviews of celebrities, followers, friends, and archivists — to re-create the world of the king of pop art.

TV SHOW

7. 'Better Things' Season Five

Sam Fox and her very cool kids navigate big life changes in the final season of Pamela Adlon's FX hit — and there are still plenty of heartbreaking quips, hot jams, and mouthwatering cooking montages to keep us hooked.

For reviews, premieres, and more, go to RollingStone.com/music

BOOK

8. 'Finding Normal'

In the first half of the new nonfiction book (subtitled *Sex, Love, and Taboo in Our Hyperconnected World*), journalist Alexa Tsoulis-Reay celebrates sexuality in the internet era — while the second looks at the dangers of being *too* connected.

PODCAST

9. 'The Trojan Horse Affair'

Doctor turned investigative journalist Hamza Syed teamed up with Brian Reed (host of *S-Town*) to get to the bottom of a mysterious episode in the U.K.'s war on terror. The latest from *Serial*'s production company recalls the twists and turns of their genre-defining shows of the 2010s.

SURFBORT HIT A HALF-PIPE IN 'LOT LIZARD 93'

Miller

DANI MILLER, the Rainbow Brite singer of riotous punk group Surfbort, doesn't skateboard much anymore. Growing up in California, she and her friends would swipe extra wood from construction sites to build ramps, but these days Miller, 27, mostly uses her board for transport. "I can't really do any tricks," she admits. Still, the singer and sometime Gucci Beauty model is reconnecting with the sport in a new video, "Lot Lizard 93" — directed by and co-starring Olympian skater Lizzie Armanto. "It was a song about finding myself," says Miller. "She took that and she came up with little snippets of my life."

In the video, Armanto briefly takes on Miller's persona so "Dani" can hit a half-pipe — ending in a fall that takes Miller back on her journey. "Having an epiphany of her in the desert with her band as the ending, that's her goal," says Armanto. "In skateboarding, without failing, you don't learn anything. This was kind of a play on that."

Surfbort have a busy year ahead. In October, they released their sophomore LP, *Keep on Truckin'* (produced by Linda Perry), and are planning on a tour, an acoustic EP, and another video featuring X-Games champion Tony Hawk, in which Miller uses the legendary athlete himself as a skateboard. "Because I've skated him," she jokes, "I'm now kind of a pro skater also."

ELISABETH GARBER-PAUL

LEFT TO RIGHT, FROM TOP: A24; RICHARD DREW/AP IMAGES; SUZANNE TENNER/FX; SACHA LECCA; RODGER GROSSMAN; HULTON-DEUTSCH COLLECTION/CORBIS/CORBIS/GETTY IMAGES

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Sasami Ashworth
in Los Angeles

SPOTLIGHT

Sasami's Furious Music for Soft Souls

The "satanic Brian Wilson" talks about how metal riffs and pure rage helped unlock her potential

IN A COZY CABIN OFF the coast of Seattle, Sasami Ashworth hammered out the heaviest metal riffs she could. It was February 2020, and the Los Angeles-based musician had decamped to a songwriting retreat with her ears still ringing from a devastating death-metal show she'd attended the night before. "I went so hard," Ashworth, 31, recalls with a laugh. "I was throwing elbows alone."

Ashworth grew up playing French horn and studied classical music before working with acts like Cherry Glazerr and Vagabon. Her 2019 solo debut as Sasami was an intimate set of indie and shoegaze – but soon she began to itch for louder sounds.

"I've always toured with an all-femme band, and that can be this physical battle of convincing the sound people you're worthy of their attention," she says. "You're constantly being told to turn your amps down.... I just turn the amp up and my voice gets more aggressive."

Ashworth barreled headlong into heavy-metal and industrial sounds on her second album, *Squeeze*. It's a reinvention that makes perfect sense to her friend Kyle Thomas of King Tuff, who compares Ashworth to "a satanic Brian Wilson": "She has a rare talent where she can hear exactly what the arrangement of a song needs to be and then she executes it perfectly," he writes.

Ashworth hopes that *Squeeze* will offer an emotional outlet for folks who don't always gravitate toward aggressive music. "For me, music is like gasoline for your feelings," she explains. "I wanted to make music that more-marginalized people could relate to and use as fuel." JON BLISTEIN

PHOTOGRAPH BY **Daniel Topete** | **17**

ROLLING STONE AUDIO AWARDS 2022

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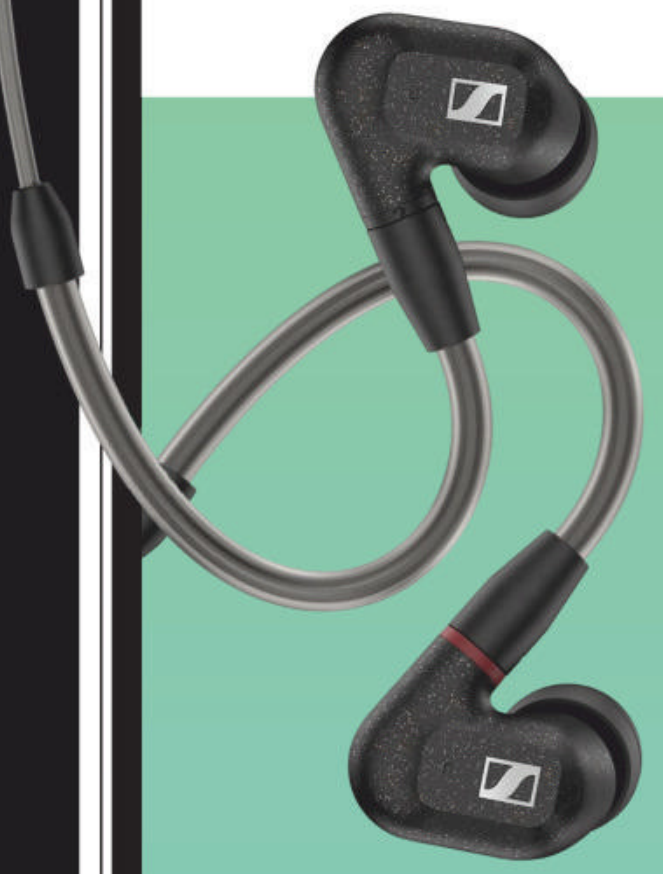

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Q&A

Charli XCX

The pop star on her evil alter ego and why she won't watch her new documentary again

By BRITTANY SPANOS

CHARLI XCX has long been one of pop's most galaxy-brained writers and performers, but she's ready for what she calls her "main pop-girl moment." With her new album, *Crash,* she presents a brilliant case: It's an airtight pop project full of top-notch hooks that also functions as a quick tour through the past couple of decades of the genre. Like everything the artist does, *Crash* is, first and foremost, fun. "I think the people who know me and my work know that 50 percent of the time I'm entirely serious, and the other 50 percent of the time I'm a troll," she says, calling from the English countryside. *Crash* follows 2020's *How I'm Feeling Now,* an album she made under a tight deadline in Covid lockdown. She's immortalized that process with a new documentary, *Alone Together.* Like the album whose creation it captured, the documentary is a deeply personal release, giving a glimpse into her private life and the emotional turmoil caused by the pandemic and a self-imposed deadline for the album. "Sometimes people don't get it," she says of her work. "Sometimes people don't like it. But that's what I like to do."

I just watched the documentary—

Oh, God. . . .

Why "Oh, God"?

It feels like a different time, a different lifetime. Honestly, it's hard to watch myself be so upset. Also, unfortunately, me and my partner at that time are no longer together. The whole thing is really emotional for me. I probably won't be watching it again.

That film is a snapshot of your 2020, so I'm curious how your 2021 went.

I had actually begun making *Crash* prior to *How I'm Feeling Now,* but I decided to pivot from making that record when the pandemic hit and it was evident what the global state was. It felt quite drastic to get back into that swing after having made something [*How I'm Feeling Now*] in the most low-fi way I've made music since I was 14 and making things in my bedroom, to go from shooting music videos on a rented green screen in my basement to going to Mexico City to shoot with Hannah Lux Davis. But I always wanted projects to feel drastically different from one another.

***Crash* has a whole concept and narrative: The "evil pop star" who has made a deal with the devil. Was that something you had in mind when you first started the album?**

I've always been interested in the idea of what a "sellout" is in modern-day pop music and if it even exists. I've been signed to a major label since I was 16. I think I've had quite an untypical major-label-artist journey, so it's interesting to operate within that framework. I suppose this record and the imagery is partially a comment on that. It's also partially a comment on what authenticity is. I think artists feel they need to really prove that they wrote their own songs, that they direct their own music videos, that they are the brain behind everything. As I got older, I began to care less and less about that because I know I can write a great pop song and I know I can communicate my vision.

You love a car theme, and both the title and cover of your new album play into that. Some fans were connecting it to David Cronenberg's film *Crash*. How spot-on are their theories?

I like the onomatopoeic-ness of *Crash*. I feel like there's been a lot of references to those kinds of titles throughout my music, from "Boom Clap" to "Vroom Vroom." One thing that's kind of interesting is the fact that I'm not driving the car on the cover. That's something I'd be really interested in reading theories about. The way that I am on the car, it's like I'm very much alive but injured, but I'm also dominating. This is all very art school of me. I also just think I look hot in the picture.

You're friends with Christine and the Queens and Caroline Polachek, who both appear on the single "New Shapes." How have those relationships developed over the years?

We've been through a lot together, musically and personally. Caroline lived in my house for three months while she was getting her own place in Los Angeles. And her partner and I used to go to art school together. Christine has been so instrumental in helping me through tricky thoughts about my relationships and sex. In part, that's what "New Shapes" is about.

Those two were going to join you when you were supposed to be the musical guest on *SNL* in December, before that episode got cut down due to a Covid surge. Are there plans for you to return to the show before the season is over?

I don't know. I really hope so because it's iconic, isn't it? I haven't done it since 2015. I was so sad. It was the Paul Rudd episode! He's such a legend. I thought the performance was going to be sick. I was like, "This would have been my best TV performance ever." When it couldn't go ahead, it was crushing. I was going to have a main pop-girl moment. Hopefully something can happen in the future. Fingers crossed.

This is your last album with Atlantic. What are you going to do next?

I wish I could give you that kind of hot exclusive, but I am not going to. Just watch this space.

EMILY LIPSON

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National Affairs

The MAGA Laboratory for Autocracy

How Wisconsin became ground zero for Donald Trump and the radical right's plot to steal the next election

By ANDY KROLL

AT 5:01 P.M. on Thursday, Dec. 2, Tim Ramthun was sitting in his living room with the TV on when his cellphone rang. He turned to his wife of four decades, Carolann. "Oh, the president's calling," he told her. She scoffed. "Hello, Mr. President," Ramthun said to the caller. "This is Representative Ramthun. May I help you?" Carolann still didn't believe him, until she heard the voice on the other end and almost fell out of her chair. She started recording a video of her husband, a junior member of the Wisconsin state Assembly, receiving praise from the 45th president of the United States.

Ramthun wasn't surprised by Donald Trump's call. A few weeks earlier, Trump had left a message on his work phone at the state Capitol at 6:30 in the morning. Trump had wanted to thank Ramthun for his continued efforts to overturn the 2020 election results, something Trump proceeded to do later that day in a written statement praising Ramthun for "putting forward a very powerful and very popular, because it's true, resolution to decertify the 2020 Presidential Election in Wisconsin based on the recently found absolute proof of large scale voter fraud that took place."

Now, with his wife recording the conversation, Ramthun listened as Trump asked what he could do to be helpful. He offered to endorse Ramthun, and Ramthun knew how powerful that endorsement could be running for reelection to the Assembly or seeking a higher office. Trump wasn't the only conservative luminary to dangle an endorsement: Mike Lindell, the CEO of MyPillow and a leader of the growing election-fraud movement in America, had twice said he'd back Ramthun. Ramthun told Trump he appreciated the pledge of support, but he wanted the former president to know that the fraud he believed he'd uncovered, and the conspiracy that tied it together, required all of his attention at the moment. First, he would pass his resolution to decertify the last presidential election, and then he would help other states follow his lead.

"If one state does this, I think others will follow," he remembers telling Trump.

"You're my kind of guy," Trump replied.

More than a year later, the Republican Party remains obsessed with Trump's defeat in 2020 and finding ways to sow doubt on that result, if not reverse it. In Arizona, conservative lawmakers and activists spent millions of dollars on a discredited "forensic audit" of every ballot cast in the state's largest county. In Pennsylvania and Georgia, GOP legislators and candidates for office have called for their own Arizona-style reviews. There are at least 21 candidates for secretary of state across the nation who have challenged the 2020 election result. Trump leads this movement to mainstream the so-called Big Lie, calling the election "rigged" and arguing that Vice President Mike Pence had "the right to change the outcome," and the GOP has, with few exceptions, marched in lockstep with him.

ANDY KROLL recently wrote about the plot to steal the 2020 Arizona election by Trump operatives.

Nowhere is this crusade to subvert the 2020 election result more on display than in Wisconsin. Even though Republicans there do not control all the levers of power – the governor, Tony Evers, is a Democrat – they have launched a multifront effort to cast doubt on the 2020 election, intimidate local officials, and, in Ramthun's case, throw out the state's presidential-election result.

Lawyers aligned with the Republican Party have filed suit after suit seeking to roll back reforms that made it easier to vote in the pandemic. A secretive investigation run by a conservative former judge with a controversial past has issued dozens of expansive subpoenas, demanded closed-door testimony of mayors and clerks, and sought jail time for those who didn't cooperate. GOP candidates and elected officials have gone so far as to demand the elimination of the state's bipartisan election commission –

JOEL LERNER/XINHUA/GETTY IMAGES

a body that Republicans created seven years ago – and potentially give the GOP-led Legislature the power to control elections. "Wisconsin is the ground zero for the fights over elections right now," says Paul Nolette, a political-science professor at Marquette University.

This effort did not start in earnest until after the 2020 election, when Trump's defeat became official, and it has yet to turn up any evidence of widespread fraud or a conspiracy to rig the outcome. For the most part, Republicans waited until months after the vote to challenge the decisions made by election officials, mayors, and local clerks to ensure access to the ballot box in 2020, such as the use of drop boxes, accepting private grant money to safely and effectively administer the election, and mailing absentee ballots directly to voters living in nursing homes. "One of the weapons in the election-subversion arsenal is having post-hoc arguments about what the rules should've been, when in fact, election contests have to be built around the rules as they existed at the time," says Bob Bauer, an election-law expert and co-chair of the Center for Election Innovation and Research's Election Official Legal Defense Network. "The attempt to change the rules after the fact is the election-subversion campaign."

'FIXING' DEMOCRACY
"Conservatives chose Wisconsin to be their testing ground for the most reactionary policies," says one lawyer.

With an eye toward the 2022 midterms and 2024 presidential election, Wisconsin Republicans now want to overhaul their democracy for the supposed sins of 2020. But the debate over how to do that has pitted Republicans against one another, with party leaders navigating an irate party base and MAGA-style lawmakers who believe the state can't focus on the next election until it has "fixed" the last one. This winter, I spent a week in the state and spoke with dozens of people about the challenges to the 2020 election and the attacks on election workers, voting policies, and more.

In Wisconsin, as in other states, the energy in the conservative movement burns hottest among those voters who believe the Republican-controlled Legislature should empower people like Ramthun and throw out Biden's 2020 victory. Moderate Republicans have responded by ostracizing Ramthun or blasting their party's descent into a post-fact cult of conspiracy theorists. "A lot of them are stuck between having to follow what is now the party line in Trump's party and trying to tamp down the most extreme calls for overturning a democratic result," professor Nolette says.

It's also created a bizarre, up-is-down environment in which a fringe lawmaker like Ramthun finds himself lauded by Trump, the party's leader, and at the same time shunned by fellow Republicans in Wisconsin for his crusade to throw out the last presidential vote.

For the first 150 years or so of its existence, Wisconsin earned a reputation as a laboratory of sorts, a testing ground for policies cooked up by liberals and conservatives. Think unemployment insurance and Social Security, school choice and voter-ID laws. Love them, hate them: Thank (or blame) Wisconsin. Deep political divides have always cleaved the state's politics – this was, after all, the home of progressive icon Fighting Bob La Follette and notorious red-baiter Joe McCarthy, the land of Republican hero Tommy Thompson and LGBTQ pioneer Tammy Baldwin. And for the past two decades, Wisconsinites have grown used to statewide elections decided by razor-thin margins and a perennial battleground-state status. But if not for Florida's hanging chads in 2000, the entire world might have converged on Wisconsin instead, where Al Gore won by 5,700 votes. Through it all, Wisconsinites saw themselves as a model for clean, open government, a kinder counterpoint to the brutal machine politics of Richard Daley's Chicago, 90 miles to the south.

For the past decade, however, Wisconsin politics have polarized in much the same way the nation has. Scott Walker's gubernato-

rial election in 2010 and his subsequent "divide-and-conquer" assault on labor unions, a surgical gerrymander that has locked in GOP majorities with no end in sight, Wisconsin Republicans, including former Speaker Paul Ryan and former White House Chief of Staff Reince Priebus, steering the party through the Trump presidency – all of it has cemented Wisconsin's place as a bastion for the Republican Party. If you want to understand where the GOP might be headed, watch Wisconsin.

"Just as conservatives used the state of Kansas a decade ago as the testing ground for the most reactionary fiscal policies they could come up with, Wisconsin is the place that conservatives have chosen to be their testing ground for the most reactionary policies related to democracy and government," says Jeff Mandell, a lawyer who represents Democratic politicians and labor unions in Wisconsin. "And it is not an accident."

CRUSADERS GOP activist Ron Heuer (left) and state Assemblyman Ramthun (below) are leading the fight to overturn the 2020 election, despite no evidence of fraud. "I've got the Lord with me," Ramthun says. "And the entire state."

IN LATE JANUARY, I meet with Tim Ramthun in his office in Madison, and we talk for nearly two hours about his push to overthrow the 2020 presidential vote in Wisconsin. Ramthun, a father of two and a grandfather of four, turns 65 in March. Bearded and intense, with an eye for pastel-colored blazers, he works out of a cramped office that feels more like an attic in the state Capitol in Madison. A small Christmas tree stands sentry on an old radiator. Above the tree hang three artifacts matted in red, white, and blue, and framed in Trumpian gold: The press release announcing his resolution to decertify Wisconsin's 2020 presidential election, the resolution itself, and Trump's statement praising Ramthun. Below the documents is a gold plaque that reads: RAMTHUN OFFICE/SAVING AMERICA.

He speaks in a mix of technical jargon and religious fervor as the words tumble out of him: "full forensic physical cyber audit" and "privileged resolution," Dominion and Lindell and someone named Dr. Frank, the Book of Genesis and state statutes 6.84 and 6.875 and 12.13. Ramthun expects you to keep up because the time to act is running out, and when he wants to emphasize a point, he flips an imaginary coin in the air and catches it on the back of his hand like a referee. Forget Democrats and Republicans, he says. Forget Trump and Biden. This isn't about personalities, he says. It's about process, it's about data, it's about facts. He speaks with such conviction that, if you didn't know any better, it almost starts to feel real. He tells me, "I have to do everything to get them to" – he flips his imaginary coin – "see the light."

Ramthun came late to the cause. He traces his journey toward the truth to a March 10, 2021, hearing of the state Assembly's campaigns and elections committee. He listened as the witnesses, all of them selected by the Republicans who ran the committee, made accusations of illegality and fraud about the way the city of Green Bay ran its 2020 election. His mind reeled as a lawyer named Erick Kaardal, who had previously represented Kanye West's campaign in the state, told the committee that "a private corporation" funded by Facebook chief executive Mark Zuckerberg had funneled millions of dollars into the state's five biggest cities, which Kaardal referred to as the "Wisconsin Five." The money had acted as bribes to those cities to get out the vote for Joe Biden, and no one had noticed it at the time.

A few months later, Ramthun attended a gathering in Sioux City, Iowa, of all the major election-fraud activists, hosted by MyPillow's Mike Lindell, and returned full of conviction that his state needed to do more to ensure integrity in the 2020 election.

Ramthun tells me he texted the speaker of the Wisconsin Assembly, Robin Vos, and urged Vos to do more to root out fraud. Vos brushed him off. So he sent out a series of press releases titled "Let There Be Light"; he talked about fraud in the "Ramthun Report," the periodic videos he made for his constituents and posted on Facebook. He asked the state Legislature's in-house lawyers what options he had as an elected official to formally claw back Wisconsin's 10 Electoral College votes; none, came the response. He sent the opinion to former President Trump's legal team, and three days later, Boris Epshteyn, a former White House aide to Trump, sent back a five-point memo saying that the nation was in "unchartered territory" and that "decertifying votes that were illegally certified would be valid."

Ramthun also received an eight-page analysis from John Eastman, the same lawyer who wrote the infamous memos arguing for how Pence could overturn the election result on Jan. 6, 2021. Eastman's memo for Ramthun, dated Dec. 30, 2021, argues that if there was "acknowledged illegality" in an election, then the result of that election was rendered null and the state Legislature had the power to pick the electors "as it sees fit." A third memo, dated Jan. 8, 2022, from a group called the Amos Center for Justice and Liberty, also supported Ramthun's position, citing the "wide-spread election fraud . . . that occurred in the largest cities of the state and throughout Wisconsin." (Eastman, Epshteyn, and the Amos Center didn't respond to requests for comment.)

Ramthun felt that he had the legal justification he needed, and still his colleagues wouldn't act. The Republican leadership, he says, treated him like a pariah: "I had indifference and I had obstruction, and it was pretty much everywhere." When he traveled the state, he urged the citizens he met to ask their representatives to join his cause; if they refused, then the voters should replace them. Soon afterward, Vos stripped him of his lone full-time staffer. Then, on the evening of Jan. 25, he stood up on the Assembly floor and introduced a resolution to decertify Biden's victory. His measure had no co-sponsors, and the Republican majority leader, Jim Steineke, vowed to kill the measure, but Ramthun had managed to persuade the Republican leadership to treat it as legitimate.

Outside the state, he was quickly becoming a conservative hero. Kari Lake, a Republican candidate for governor in Arizona, praised his resolution. The Gateway Pundit, a conspiratorial website, published the video of Ramthun's floor remarks and erroneously said that Wisconsin had in fact "voted to withdraw" its 10 electors for Biden. Sitting across from him in his office, I ask Ramthun if he felt alone in his fight. Quite the opposite, he says. He was never alone. "I've got the Lord with me. I'm surrounded by friends. And I'll tell you," he adds, "I've got the entire state behind me."

At one point in the conversation, he grabs a binder off a bookcase and drops it on the table in front of me with a thud. Six paper inches of email after email from people in Wisconsin and from outside the state thanking him for his "testicular fortitude" and "tireless dedication" to overturning the election. "For some reason we have Republicans in our state and local governments who are turning a blind eye to the fraud that is, and has happened," a couple from St. Cloud wrote.

Ramthun knew he had Trump's support. And now he had developed a following across the state. "They want me to run for governor," he says, and when I ask if he's considering it, he responds immediately: "Yes."

WISCONSIN HAS the most decentralized election system of any state in the union. Nearly 1,900 clerks at the municipal level, most of them part-time, register voters, program voting machines, run polling places, hire poll workers, mail out absentee ballots, count the votes, recount them (sometimes), and report the results to the state's election commission. From one vantage point, the decentralized nature of Wisconsin's system is seen as a strength: It would require a conspiracy of Nixonian proportions to hack or tamper with the

FROM TOP: ALYSSA SCHUKAR/"THE NEW YORK TIMES"/REDUX; WISCONSIN STATE ASSEMBLY

overall vote when the voting and counting is so dispersed. But it also means that turnover is a constant headache. A survey by the University of Wisconsin–Madison a few years ago reported a nine to 12 percent turnover among clerks each year. Meagan Wolfe, the nonpartisan administrator of the Wisconsin Elections Commission, told me that the rate of churn averages out to 12 new clerks a week who need training on how to run a safe and secure election.

No amount of training could have prepared election officials for the cataclysm that arrived in early 2020. As scattered news stories about a flu-like virus sweeping through China grew into a full-blown pandemic in the U.S., Wisconsin's election workers found themselves in a uniquely precarious spot. Three weeks after the Trump administration declared a national health emergency in response to the spread of the coronavirus, Wisconsin was scheduled to hold its presidential primary on the first Tuesday in April. It would be the first major election in any state since the pandemic officially began. Gov. Evers tried to postpone the election, but the Republican-controlled Legislature challenged his plan, and the state's conservative-leaning Supreme Court sided with the Legislature, ruling the night before election day that the election would proceed after all. With a massive shortage of poll workers and a reduction in the number of polling places in Milwaukee, voters stood in line for hours. "I quickly recognized the amount of trust from the public that we were going to have to build back after the election in April," says Claire Woodall-Vogg, executive director of Milwaukee's election commission.

Election officials decided on the fly how best to adapt in time for the next set of elections, in August, and the November general. At the center of these debates was the Wisconsin Elections Commission, which oversees all elections in the state. By law, the WEC has six commissioners, three Democratic and three Republican appointees. Created in 2016, it replaced a previous body, the Government Accountability Board, which had been run by retired judges and touted as a model for nonpartisan oversight. But after the GAB opened two secret investigations related to then-Gov. Scott Walker, one of which led to a Walker donor paying the largest civil forfeiture to the state's election regulator in history, Republicans in the Legislature replaced the agency with a more partisan model. "The GAB actually did its job, and so the Legislature said, 'Let's get rid of it,'" says Ann Jacobs, a Democratic appointee and chairwoman of the WEC.

Early in the pandemic, the WEC's six commissioners agreed they needed to adapt certain voting rules. One was a requirement that so-called special voting deputies make two visits to nursing homes before an election to assist elderly residents in filling out and submitting their ballots. Only after those two visits took place could clerks mail absentee ballots to nursing-home residents. In normal times, poll watchers from the two political parties would accompany the voting deputies to ensure equal treatment. But deputies weren't deemed essential workers by the state or federal government, and nursing homes feared endangering residents by letting the deputies and poll watchers come and go. "A lot of the nursing homes or senior living facilities didn't want people to come in," says Sara Bruckman, deputy clerk-treasurer for the town of Fox Point and president of the Wisconsin Municipal Clerks Association.

By a 6-0 vote, the state election commission voted to waive the in-person-visit requirement for the voting deputies; instead, clerks could mail absentee ballots to nursing homes right away. As Mark Thomsen, a Democratic appointee on the commission, saw it, the WEC had to help clerks find a way to keep voting accessible to those seniors even in the midst of a pandemic. "If we wouldn't have acted, we would've disenfranchised thousands of senior citizens," Thomsen says. Twice more in 2020, by 5-to-1 votes, the WEC voted to continue its guidance that the voting deputies didn't have to visit nursing homes, given the potential public-health risk to residents. The WEC solicited public comments before its first vote about the deputies, and for all three votes the WEC solicited public comments and deliberated in public, livestreamed meetings before voting. Thomsen, the WEC commissioner, says there was no opposition or backlash in the moment to the commission's decision.

"The allegation apparently is that you don't want all legal voters to vote," says a Republican lawyer critical of the effort, "which is not a good place for a party to be."

At the local level, clerks scrambled to respond to surging demand for absentee voting and find the resources to adapt to a pandemic-year election, while grappling with chronic delays created by the U.S. Postal Service. Woodall-Vogg says her office blew through most of its budget for 2020 in April alone, creating a possible crisis for the rest of the year. The state Legislature offered no help, ending its 2020 session without appropriating any additional money for elections. "We just didn't have resources," says Bruckman.

Around that time, someone in the Milwaukee mayor's office approached Woodall-Vogg and asked her if she would apply for grant money from a nonpartisan nonprofit out of Chicago, the Center for Tech and Civic Life (CTCL), that funded election administration work in dozens of states. Funded in large part by Facebook CEO Zuckerberg's charity, CTCL offered grants to municipalities that needed it. "The mayor's office said, 'Put together your wish list of absolutely everything you'd need to make voting safe and accessible for the fall, and we will submit for this grant,'" Woodall-Vogg recalls.

In the summer of 2020, Wisconsin's five biggest cities – Milwaukee, Kenosha, Madison, Green Bay, and Racine – combined their requests for money into a single, 21-page document. The cities asked for a total of $6.3 million. They intended to use this money, they wrote, to run safe elections during the pandemic and educate voters on how to vote in a challenging moment, which included encouraging people to vote absentee. The document also stressed that the cities would use the money to "be intentional and strategic in reaching our historically disenfranchised residents and communities." The document makes no mention of partisan affiliation or party loyalty; it does state a desire to increase absentee voting.

To Woodall-Vogg's surprise, she got everything she asked for. When she later realized she needed additional funds, she asked for more from CTCL and received that, too. She used the money to purchase twice as many high-speed vote tabulators for counting absentee ballots; increase the wages for election workers to $15 an hour; pay higher postage costs; upgrade the security systems for the city's ballot drop boxes; send out mailers about how to vote absentee; and rent additional vehicles for election workers to use. "The way we spend our money is entirely transparent," she says. "We can account for every dollar."

In the moment, the steps taken by election clerks and officials to adapt to the pandemic went unchallenged or caused little controversy. The Wisconsin Elections Commission continued to issue guidance. CTCL gave more than $10 million in grants to 214 municipalities in Wisconsin. The bulk of the money went to the five most-populous cities, which are heavily Democratic and home to most of the state's Black and Hispanic citizens, but smaller counties received funding as well. Marathon County, which had the highest number of municipalities awarded a CTCL grant, supported Trump in 2020, as did the county of Marinette, with the second-highest number of grants.

It wasn't until September 2020, six weeks before the general election, that the first sign of what was coming appeared. A small, newly created nonprofit called the Wisconsin Voter Alliance filed a lawsuit in federal court for an injunction that would block the state's five largest and most diverse cities – but none of the other municipalities – from accepting CTCL's money. Citing an obscure part of state law, the suit alleged that the cities had violated the law by committing the crime of election bribery.

A judge swiftly dismissed it, writing that the complaint had no basis in law. The election took place soon afterward, and Biden carried Wisconsin by about 20,000 votes. Under state law, the Trump campaign had the opportunity to request a full, statewide recount of every paper ballot. "There is no greater forensic audit than a statewide paper-ballot recount," says David Becker, executive director of the Center for Election Innovation and Research.

Trump's campaign chose not to do so. Instead it asked for a post-election recount of just the two largest counties by popu- [*Cont. on 78*]

ICONS & INFLUENCES

CELEBRATING WOMEN WHO'VE CHANGED THE CULTURE

'I Just Said *Fuck It'*

How Jennifer Lopez Broke All the Rules

By Alex Morris PHOTOGRAPHS BY CHRISEAN ROSE

ON A WARM December day in her West Hollywood offices, actress, singer, dancer, producer, mogul, brand, and multi-multimillionaire Jennifer Lopez was trying not to say too much. "I'm trying not to say too much," she says, verbatim, as she sits on a leather chesterfield wearing a serene expression, a loose ponytail, and a white sweatsuit that exposes several inches of midriff. "I'm really happy. I don't want to say anything else."

It wasn't always thus. For a brief and beautiful moment in time, saying too much was kind of Lopez's thing. Hearken back to the late Nineties, when she was married to some waiter no one had ever heard of and would meet reporters in a bikini top by her Beverly Hills pool and let loose with things like: "This two-bit town isn't big enough for me." And: "I was like a rocket, he was like a rock." And: "I have the 'stardom' glow." And: "The fear of being alone drives my life." She'd talk about how Oliver Stone smelled of spicy lavender and how Woody Harrelson flicked his tongue ("very nasty") and how Madonna should just stay in her lane and stick to singing. Asked about Gwyneth Paltrow, she had this to say: "Tell me what she's been in? I swear to God I don't remember."

So it's clear that Lopez knows how to dish, that she could dish if she wanted to. And, on a meta level, you'd think she might, considering that the task at hand is to discuss her latest film, *Marry Me*, which she produced and starred in and for which there is a soundtrack that she also developed and performed on, meaning that it is a Lopez project par excellence. The movie concerns a certain Kat Valdez, a global superstar who is moments away from getting married in front of millions of fans when she learns that her fiancé (Maluma, steamy) has been unfaithful. In a panic, she does what approximately zero people would do and instead marries some random guy from the crowd (Owen Wilson, very adept at being "some random guy"). Moderate hilarity ensues, though maybe not as much as you would imagine for a movie that also features Sarah Silverman.

To put a fine point on it: Jennifer Lopez, a global superstar who has (allegedly) been cheated on time and again and who was (possibly) left if not at the altar then adjacent to it by Ben Affleck – who, in a magical twist of fate, she is dating again some 18 years later – is playing a global superstar who blah, blah, you get it. Art imitates life. You are ready to dig into the emotional resonance.

"There's a lot about [Kat] that only somebody like me could understand, right?" Lopez concedes. "I had to keep reminding myself: You know what it's like to be onstage in front of an arena full of people and something embarrassing happens. That's happened to you. What do you do? What does it feel like when it all falls apart and you go home and you're on the TV and they're making fun of you as if it's not painful? How does that feel? You know what? You've cried in a puddle on the floor too. That's what it feels like. Or going underwater at that point where you feel like you're drowning, suffocating in your own decisions that you know are not the right ones."

You concur that certainly all that feels not great, though perhaps the not-greatness is obscured cinematically by all those beautiful rooms and designer clothes and product placements and impeccable lighting. That's why it might be nice to talk about these things in a more personal way. For example, those decisions that she knew were not the right ones – would she care to elaborate on those?

She would not. At least not directly. "You start realizing there are no rules," she says obliquely, feet propped up on the chesterfield and two caramel tendrils of hair falling into her perfect face. "There's only what you feel is right for you. Because that's the person you've got to live with at the end of the day. Any time I've gone against my gut and my instinct, I've ended in misery."

OK, but what is an example of a time you ended in misery?

"So many things. I can give you a small example. Just, like, anything in fear. Anything where you're like, 'Oh, maybe I should do this because if I don't, people won't see me for a while.' Then you're just, 'I shouldn't have done that. That was a stupid move. That didn't turn out well.' "

Is there one specific situation that didn't turn out well?

"I'm trying to think of something specific." She pushes back a tendril. She scratches her leg. "It's so hard."

FASHION DIRECTION BY ALEX BADIA. PRODUCED BY BRITTANY BROOKS. HAIR BY CHRIS APPLETON AT THE WALL GROUP. MAKEUP BY MARY PHILLIPS. NAILS BY TOM BACHIK AT A-FRAME AGENCY. TAILORING BY MIA PARANTO. STYLING BY ROB & MARIEL AT FORWARD ARTISTS. PREVIOUS SPREAD: TOP BY ALEX PERRY, JEWELRY BY JENNIFER FISHER. THIS SPREAD: BODYSUIT BY HERVÉ LÉGER. SHOES BY JESSICA RICH. SET DESIGN BY CARLOS LOPEZ AT WINSTON STUDIOS.

"Ben and I were together and so in love. It was one of the happiest times of my life. But we were being criticized, and it destroyed our relationship from the inside out."

What about her relationship with Affleck? Is that finally, belatedly, turning out well?

"I won't talk about it a lot. We've both grown. We're the same, and we're different. And that's what's nice."

Nice? *Nice*?

"Yeah . . . having a second chance at real love . . . yeah." Now the leg is shaking. "Like I said, we learned a lot. We know what's real, what's not real. So it's just – the game has changed. Again, I'm trying not to say too much."

IN FAIRNESS, there is much that Lopez is willing to discuss, if we rewind a bit. She is happy to share that she was around eight years old when she set her sights on something bigger than the Castle Hill neighborhood of the Bronx where she grew up, attending Catholic school and watching *Happy Days* and tacking Menudo posters on the light-pink walls of the room she shared with her younger sister, Lynda. "I wanted to accomplish things," she says. "I had that competitive kind of spirit."

Her father was a computer-repair technician, her mother a kindergarten teacher who would come home from church on Sunday and record the Top 40 countdown on cassette tapes. Jennifer, the middle of three girls, would dance in front of the mirror in her room, pretending she was Rita Moreno in *West Side Story*. Her first job was earning $10 to sweep the hair and clean the sinks of a beauty shop owned by a family friend. Later, at 15, she sold bootleg perfume from "a bootleg kind of perfume store behind the gas station." As a girl, she dreamed of owning one of those large Barbie styling heads, but when she tried to steal a Barbie from her cousin, she tripped and fell down the stairs. "It was almost like something pushed me down. God was like, 'Don't ever take a Barbie from this house.' " She gives credence to things like that, "psychic ability and premonition and things being meant to be."

As a kid, Lopez was not a special snowflake. She was the daughter of Puerto Rican parents who were hard on her because the world was hard on them. Her mother, Guadalupe, had wanted to be an actress. People told her she looked like Natalie Wood. Then she had three kids in four years and began selling Tupperware for extra cash. She was not a natural nurturer. She was not a hand-holder. She expected her daughters to excel, but also made them aware of their limitations. She would sometimes slap them around. "It was that type of mentality: That's how you keep kids in line," says Lopez. "That's how they were raised, and that's how I was raised. Listen, my mom was also a fun mom. My mom was also the mom who got me into musicals and introduced me to all kinds of music. I am an entertainer because of my mom. But I'm also able to survive the things I've survived in this business because my mom was tough. I don't think she could realize what she was preparing me for, but she did."

Lopez mostly toed the line until she turned 16 and started dating a neighborhood kid named David Cruz. He took her to prom. They started sleeping together. Lupe worried Jennifer would get herself pregnant, so Lopez took to sneaking out her second-story window to meet up with Cruz on the sly. Returning home required stealth use of a ladder. "I was good at sneaking out," she says. "But when I did get caught, it was bad."

Not quite as bad, however, as the fight that went down when she informed her parents that she had dropped out of college to devote herself to dance full time. "They definitely had their doubts. I mean, I would too. Listen, if we were growing up in the Bronx right now, and one of my kids came to me and said, 'This is what I want to do,' I'd be like, '*Okaaaay*.' You'd just think to yourself, 'Oh, really? How are you going to pull that off? You're going to call a rich Hollywood produc-

er and they're going to put you in a movie? You're going to get discovered? Like, get real.' " She laughs out loud at the absurdity of landing where she has. "When you grow up in those neighborhoods, to dream bigger is only to set yourself up for disappointment."

Lopez left home for good, hastily throwing some things in a bag and sleeping for a time on the sofa of the Phil Black studio. She lived off small dancing gigs – $25 here, $50 there – and dollar pizza and Cup Noodles, treating herself every so often to waffles at a joint called Good Enough to Eat. In 1991, she joined *In Living Color* as a Fly Girl, though she hadn't actually booked her L.A. audition. "Keenen [Ivory Wayans] told me he let the girls pick because he felt like I was such an obvious winner," Lopez says. "The cameras were there. He was like, 'Let's have a vote,' and they all picked this other girl." Afterward, Wayans called her. "He said he and Rosie [Perez, the choreographer] were going to make it right. So they let her finish out that season, and then the next year they brought me in."

Such details go a long way toward explaining the friction Lopez faced after moving to L.A. in 1991. Her first week on the job, one of the girls told her they'd had to postpone a photo shoot because they were waiting for Lopez to lose weight. Plans to turn some of the Fly Girls into a group that would have predated the Spice Girls and Destiny's Child fizzled. Bored and adrift in L.A., she started taking acting classes and found out that she had a real knack. In 1996, with videos for Janet Jackson and the New Kids on the Block under her belt, as well as parts in a handful of TV shows and a couple of movies, Lopez beat out 22,000 other women for the role of Selena Quintanilla in a biopic of the beloved Tejano star. Her performance earned her a Golden Globe nomination and made her the first Latin actor to earn more than a million dollars for a role. Within a few years, she had filmed *Jack,* with Robin Williams; *Blood and Wine,* with Jack Nicholson; and *Out of Sight,* with George Clooney. She was, as she said at the time, edging into "the bottom of the A list of actresses."

So she did what approximately zero people would do at that particular moment and decided to record an album. One of the musicians who had been in *Selena* – and in the real Selena's band – gave her a song to use as a demo. The Work Group, a division of Sony with which she'd signed, didn't pay the demo much mind until it landed on the desk of Sony chairman Tommy Mottola, who had allegedly had a falling out with another Latina artist and was looking to make a point. He set Lopez up with a room in the St. Regis Hotel and the mandate to get an album done, pulling earworms from lesser-known artists and gifting them to her. It worked. *On the 6* (named after the subway line Lopez would take to get from the Bronx to Manhattan) went triple platinum and sold more than 8 million copies worldwide, to the surprise of many. "She wasn't on the radar," says one Nineties pop star who ran in the same circles. "But she was a workhorse, single-mindedly hellbent on success. She was going to get there one way or another. I don't think she had any other intentions than to be a global superstar."

"She wasn't very good in the beginning, but she got better," says Maria Christensen, who wrote and recorded "Waiting for Tonight" with her band 3rd Party and then licensed the song to Lopez. "The engineers thought she was a never-give-up kind of person. They would comp vocals, do a bunch of takes and put them together. She would just work so hard, sing it over and over. She would just go until she couldn't go any more."

That worked, too. Lopez's second album, *J.Lo* (titled after a nickname given to her by late rapper Heavy D), debuted at Number One the same week that *The Wedding Planner* was the number-one box-office movie in America. No one had ever held those two slots simultaneously before.

So then she made some more movies (31 and counting) and some more albums (nine, with *Marry Me*) and a world tour and a Vegas residency and many appearances as a judge on *American Idol* and several clothing lines and countless brand partnerships and a skin-care line and a set of twin humans and roughly one million perfumes, and despite it all, she still feels like her success has been "slow and steady." She thinks back to the moment she knew that her life had changed for good, a night in the late Nineties that she spent jet-lagged, pacing her London hotel suite and staring at the many pairs of designer shoes lined up against one wall. "I was like, 'I remember having holes in the bottom of my sneakers,' " she says. "I was just like, 'Is this happening?' It was almost like a fucking fairy tale. And it wasn't about the wealth of it. It was about the change, the disparity in it. That suite was bigger than the house I grew up in. Way bigger."

By now, she's no doubt gotten used to the wealth, but the disparity sticks. "I think I'm an underdog," she continues. "I always feel like I was scrapping from the bottom. Always. I always felt like I wasn't the one that was supposed to be in the room. That's part of being Puerto Rican and from the Bronx and a woman. You know what I mean? All of that stuff. Not being born into a family with money. Not knowing anybody in the business. I just went out there and said, 'Fuck it. I'm going to just try. I'm going to try to get in here.' "

> "I'm an underdog. I always feel like I was scrapping from the bottom. Always. That's part of being Puerto Rican and from the Bronx and a woman."

LOPEZ HAS A HISTORY of doing interviews in one of her many perfect homes, but today she had wanted to meet in her office, which was passed off – without apparent irony – as her true natural habitat, the place where she Gets Amazing Shit Done. The bland corporate hallways give pause, but once you're through the thick, wooden door, the office seems less an office than an immersive experience in extreme luxury. There is a viewing/music room with an acrylic Steinhoven piano, a huge, circular green velvet sofa, and a gas fireplace producing a green flame as if it were combusting legal tender. There is a sleek kitchen with various healthful drinks lined up in the high-end fridge like battalions. There is a mirrored glam room with a blond, herringbone floor and brass accents. There is a holiday gift from Tom Ford sitting idly on the marble ledge of the unmanned front desk, under the gleaming letters BRX – for "Bronx," of course – and across from a floor-to-ceiling rendering of New York as seen from above. The glass walls that divide the rarefied air are so pristine that at one point earlier in the day, Lynda had walked right into one with a thud. "Pay attention, please," said Lopez's longtime manager, Benny Medina, in a tone that may have been joking, though it was hard to tell for sure. He'd been in the middle of explaining how the office is Lopez's vision because she does everything with vision and taste and the type of control that listens to input but maybe only to a point. "She let me pick my desk," says Medina as pop music wafts from no discernible direction or source. Everywhere is the scent of Le Labo Santal 26 and a precipitous view.

Lopez has settled into a sort of listening room toward the back of the office so that she can play the *Marry Me* soundtrack, and soon she is closing her eyes and rocking her shoulders as she sings along to measured songs about love and heartbreak and loss of control. Less than a week before, Affleck had let slip to Howard Stern that he "probably still would have been drinking" if he had stayed married to Jennifer Garner, and the public had lost its collective mind at the implication that marriage to one of America's handful of sweethearts might have driven him to regularly "[drink] a bottle of scotch and [fall] asleep on the couch." Suddenly, access to Lopez had been tamped down. Today's scene seems designed to display her ironclad control over her brand and her image. The songs are catchy, but the lyrics give little of Lopez away.

Then again, few celebrities have had to deal with the shitty parts of fame to quite the extent

SUIT BY BALMAIN. CUFFS BY TIFFANY'S. EARRINGS BY JENNIFER FISHER. SHOES BY GIUSEPPE ZANOTTI

that Lopez has – the body-shaming shit, the sexist shit, the racist shit – and the time she spent dating Affleck before probably marked the height of it. "Instead of being celebrated, they criticized. They marginalized. They wouldn't give it to her, ever," says her friend and producing partner Elaine Goldsmith-Thomas. "Here was a woman who had the Number One movie and the Number One album. That had never happened. And they were writing about Puffy. [A year later] *Maid in Manhattan* was Number One. But here's what the press said: 'Ben Affleck sleeps with the help.' She just didn't get the credit that other – I don't know how else to say it – white actresses got. And I know, because I worked with them."

South Park called her a "mean-spirited bitch" in an episode that poked fun at her Latin heritage. Conan O'Brien said that, as stand-ins for the couple in a sketch, he'd cast "our script intern" as Affleck and "our cleaning lady" as Lopez. "It was brutal," Lopez says now. "It was brutal. It's one of those things that you bury very deeply so you can move on and get about your business." She was able to compartmentalize, until eventually she wasn't. "It's funny because Ben and I were together, and we were so in love. It was one of the happiest times of my life. But also, there was this other thing happening where we were being criticized, and it really destroyed our relationship from the inside out, because we were just too young to understand at that time what were really the most important things in life."

Some of those things Lopez will talk about. She talks about going to therapy, and about how she's "become much more spiritual" since having kids. She says that she prays often and repeats affirmations throughout the day ("I am whole; I am good on my own; I love the universe, the universe loves me"). She says that she woke up this morning at 8 a.m. to a swelling of gratitude in her heart. Her sister had flown in from New York a few days back. Her mom was arriving. Christmas was around the corner, and many beautiful gifts had been bought and many beautiful plans had been made. "I try to always live from a place of gratitude," she says completely unironically. "But today, especially, if you ask me what my first thought was, it was, 'Thank you. Thank you, God, for this day. Thank you for my life, what it is.' "

Having expressed that gratitude, she says she slipped on her Gucci slides, padded into the bathroom, slipped off her short set, and turned on the shower, resolved, as always, to be her best self today. "I will always try to be manifesting that in my life, to be doing the best I can and make the world a better place," she says. Also: "I'm really happy, probably more than I've even been in my whole life." She connects that happiness to Affleck, though she won't specify what about him makes her happy or what made her less happy before. Or rather, she will specify some of those things, but she asks me to turn my recorder off before she says them – an act that seems calculated to show the calculations she's making. She talks about reading *You Can Heal Your Life*, which taught her that she could control how she thought about things, even if she couldn't control the things themselves. She says, "For me, it's always been very important to figure myself out."

Part of that process of figuring herself out has involved figuring out how much of herself to share, especially now that her public persona reflects not just on her but on her children. "It's a real juggling act," she says. "People can be super judgy. You know, you let them into your house and then they talk about your fireplace or, you know, 'Oh, is that real? Did they stage that?' " But it has also involved some soul-searching on her three divorces (to Marc Anthony, most recently) and her two called-off engagements (to Alex Rodriguez, most recently) and the multiple breakups she has had to undergo in the public eye and what it says about her that she hasn't been able to create the nuclear family she's always wanted. "When I was in my forties," she says, "it was like, 'Well, you're not really loving yourself. You're allowing things to happen in your life where you're overachieving in your work, and your personal life . . . ' " She pauses. " 'Is not . . . ' " She trails off again. "And it fueled my artistic life, which is great in a lot of ways, because it made me want to overachieve. It made me want to feel better. It made me want to do better and be successful and be better as an artist and grow, and I have. But also, you just want to feel good in your life."

She looks about the room and then decides to go on about why maybe she didn't. "It's not really even your first love that teaches you what love is," she says. "It's your mother and your father, what you were taught as a child that life is and love is, through how your parents are with you. Those

OUTFIT BY LAQUAN SMITH

are the things that you have to go back and work on and examine, when you are having relationships and repeating patterns and going, 'Oh, what is this happening for?' " Her parents divorced when their children were grown. She doesn't want to go into too many details, but whatever transpired, she does want it known that she feels she's moved on. "I don't begrudge it," she says later. "I really feel like [my mom] did the best she could. And when I think of it that way, it's easier to get past the punishments and the spankings and things that happened. I don't want to raise my kids in that way, but I understand."

Then again, she's not sure her parents understand her. "How could they?" she asks. "I think they are confused by my life." And they are not alone. "When one person becomes famous in a family it causes a lot of discord. It can be complicated for both sides. It got complicated for me, like, 'Is this still, you know, my family who loves me and accepts me and understands me and feels like I'm the same person, or do they see me as different as well?' For them, it was like, 'OK, well, now she's this, and what does that mean? How much do I expect? How much do I ask for and how much do I not?' There's confusion. There's resentment and very mixed, complicated, adult feelings. You know, 'What is all this?' "

provided, there is still that disconnect – between where Lopez came from and where she is, but also between where she is and where she thinks she could be. One year she was on the cover of 46 magazines. Her music has helped make Latin pop mainstream. But she never won that Golden Globe. Nor was she nominated for an Oscar despite near-universal consensus that she should have been. It wasn't even that long ago that she was basically broke. This was when her twins, Emme and Max, were toddlers and she was in the process of divorcing Anthony and her label had dropped her and her album sales were lackluster and she was over 40 and no one would cast her in their movie and she wanted to trade in a car. "And my business manager was like, 'Nope, you can't do anything right now,' " she says. "I was like, 'Really?' He's like, 'Yeah, let's not make any moves right now. Let's just wait until you can work again.' "

"There's a club I just wasn't a part of. And I always acted like, 'I'm good. I'm OK.' But it hurts not to be included. I don't know if I ever will be."

So Lopez did work. Despite warnings that it would be the nail in the coffin of her career, she took a job on *American Idol*, beaming herself into American homes two nights a week and comporting herself not as a diva who insisted on being surrounded by white lilies and insured her ass (that's not a thing, for what it's worth) but rather as a hardworking single mom who got all teary when contestants soared or failed. She launched her first world tour. Nuyorican picked up *Hustlers* to the clamorous admonitions of (male) industry types who thought that the strippers should be made more "likable." Lopez ignored these comments and spent her last prepandemic year learning how to slay on a stripper pole. She shot *Hustlers* – for which she did not take a salary – in 29 days. When she was asked to perform at the 2020 Super Bowl with Shakira, protestations erupted that NFL bigwigs thought it took two Latinas to do the job of one white man. Lopez took the job anyway and used her platform to fill the field of Miami's Hard Rock Stadium with Latino children – including one of her own – singing in glowing, white cages as those NFL bigwigs presumably lost their minds. During the pandemic, she has prepped for and shot not one but two movies, orchestrated a documentary about her life, finished postproduction for *Marry Me*, marched with her children for Black Lives Matter, performed at Biden's inauguration, broken off her engagement with Rodriguez, rekindled things with Affleck, and spent this past fall in Canada, waking up at 5 a.m. to work out so she could be in hair and makeup by 6:15 so she could be on set for *The Mother* by 7:30. In between shots, she had parented from afar, FaceTiming the twins on the way to school, hosting Zoom dinners, and imploring them to "Brush your teeth! Get in bed!" from more than 1,900 miles away.

In other words, she has worked so hard. She has endeavored to say only the right things and do only the right things and live in that place of self-love and gratitude. But she still feels that disconnect. "It's just 20, 25 years of people going, 'Well, she's not that great. She's pretty and she makes cute music, but it's not really this and that.' You know, I think I've done some nice work over the years. But there is a club that I just wasn't a part of. And I always acted like, 'Yeah, I'm good. I'm fine. I'm OK.' But it hurts to not be included. I don't know if I will ever be. There is an inner circle, like, 'We are the great artists.' And then there's the pop artists." Dreaming big can set you up for disappointment. She's known that since she was just a girl in the Bronx sneaking out the window to meet her first boyfriend.

Not that long ago, Lopez called David Cruz's mom. He had passed away from heart disease, and when Lopez heard the news, she realized that she still remembered his home number by heart, so she picked up her phone and dialed it. His mom answered. "I was like, 'Hi. It's Jennifer Lopez,' and she was like, 'Jennifer . . .' I said, 'I'm so sorry,' and she started crying. I was like, 'You know I loved David.' She was like, 'I know. He loved you, too. He always loved you.' " She pauses. "You get lucky, you have a first love like that."

She reaches for her iPad. Cruz had taken her to prom, and she suddenly wants to see the picture. "I'm just trying to look up 'Jennifer Lopez prom picture,' " she says, mashing her fingers into the screen and slightly furrowing her brow, assuming that the picture – like most of her life – would be available for public consumption. She's right: A moment later, she holds up a grainy black and white image of her 17-year-old self, smiling broadly in satin and lace. Cruz stands behind her, sweet-faced and grinning. "I made my prom dress. A pink halter, mermaid. Pink satin with lace on top. I drew it and gave it to this dressmaker in the neighborhood and was like, 'This is the dress I want to make.' I had a vision."

"As opposed to when you used to cut my bangs, which was wrong," offers Lynda, walking in. Lopez shrugs. Not all visions can be visionary.

Then again, she believes in vision, she believes in fate, she believes that things happen for a reason. She trusts that she will one day get her due. She does not foresee another public breakup with Affleck in her future. "I don't think we would have got back together if we thought that was where it was headed," she says. "We feel like what we found again is so much more important, and how we protect that and how we live our lives – what to share, what not to share – is the balance that we have now, the benefit of experience and the wisdom that we gained over the years."

Beyond that, what more can she say?

THESE ARE ALL heady feelings to try to capture in a musical rom-com, which is probably one of the reasons Lopez felt that *Marry Me* would be a good, safe project for her, one in which she could comment on some parts of her life without having to say too much. The movie is certainly an unexpected follow-up to *Hustlers*, in which her electric performance as stripper-turned-criminal Ramona earned her a Golden Globe nomination and much acclaim. But Lopez says that she had long wanted to do a movie and soundtrack simultaneously (she refers to the *Marry Me* album not as a Lopez album but as a Kat Valdez album), and anyway she still isn't often considered for gritty, hard-hitting parts. "I don't even know half the movies when they come out at the end of the year," she says. "I have the top agents in the world, but [those projects] don't come to me." She founded Nuyorican Productions – which produced both *Hustlers* and *Marry Me* – specifically to "take my career in my own hands."

In fact, one of the defining features of Lopez's fame is that, despite the wealth and luxury it has

PORTRAITS

A fearless documentary producer, a tireless keeper of Afro-Colombian musical tradition, and an electrifying film and TV star are among the women who are changing culture today

Petrona Martinez

THE GUARDIAN

Bullerengue – the percussive, female-led folk tradition developed in Black Caribbean communities – was passed down to the legendary Petrona Martinez like a sacred family heirloom. Growing up in Colombia in the 1940s, she'd sit with her grandmother and great-grandmother in a *rueda,* or circle, where the women would take turns singing call-and-response melodies. The sounds came to Martinez as naturally as breathing. ▶

BY JULYSSA LOPEZ

SHARON ALVIZ

"That's where the artistic vein formed," says her daughter, Joselina Llerena.

Years later, Martinez settled in the region of Palenquito. She made a living by gathering and selling sand – intense, arduous work that she would lighten on the weekends by taking her children to a nearby river, where she would do the washing and sing the songs she had learned as a girl. One day, a local musician named Marceliano Orozco was talking to one of her older sons, and Orozco mentioned hearing a woman by the river singing some of the most powerful bullerengue he'd ever heard. Soon, Orozco became part of Martinez's first band. She released her debut album in 1989, at the age of 55, cementing her reputation as an inimitable custodian of bullerengue traditions.

"THE AMAZING THING ABOUT PETRONA IS HER RESILIENCE. THAT'S WHAT I TAKE FROM HER MUSIC: SHE'S SAYING, 'WE'RE STILL HERE.'"

Martinez's voice has continued to mesmerize listeners over the past several decades, even after a cerebral ischemia in 2017 limited her speech and mobility. Last summer, she released the acclaimed album *Ancestras,* a dynamic, emotionally charged celebration that brings together women from the African diaspora – Susana Baca, Angélique Kidjo, Brianna Thomas – to sing on some of the most indelible recordings from Martinez's catalog. The result is a powerful union of Black roots from across the world.

The Grammy-nominated artist Lido Pimienta fell in love with Martinez's music when she was part of a band in Barranquilla. "There's a general untold story of slavery that happens in Colombia specifically," Pimienta says, noting that Martinez captures the lived experience of Blackness in Latin America. "The amazing thing about Petrona is that her resilience is so enormous, it transcends anything. Her tradition is going to continue even when she's gone from the physical world. That's what I take away from her music – she's saying, 'We're still here.'"

Li Saumet of the band Bomba Estéreo recalls listening to singers like Martinez as a child, shaping her own style of singing. "Traditional music is our roots," she says. "It's what we are. It's something that, if it were to disappear, our story disappears."

Bullerengue is deeply tied to Colombia's history of enslaving people, explains Stanley Montero, an artist and instrumentalist who has been a part of Martinez's musical family for decades. The Colombian city of Cartagena was a principal port for trading enslaved people; many escaped to form communities known as *palenques,* where bullerengue traditions thrived, pulling from African customs. "You can extradite a human, you can displace them, but you can't do that to the culture they bring with them," Montero says. According to some accounts, the earliest forms of bullerengue were sung by pregnant women confined at home. The music was passed along the generations, reaching Martinez. "She comes from an impressive bullerengue genealogical tree," he says. "Bullerengue is embedded in her DNA."

Though Martinez has faced health challenges more recently, Llerena says her mother has been making progress – and that her music continues to be her great joy. "She's at every rehearsal," Llerena says. "It's not practice unless Petrona is there."

Recognition like the Latin Grammy that Martinez won for *Ancestras* last fall – her first award from the academy – is meaningful, but Pimienta urges musical institutions to do more. "In Colombia, the media doesn't celebrate Blackness and indigeneity – it's something that's relegated to national holidays. And this happens all over Latin America," she says. "Hopefully, more people with good intentions start looking at Afro-Colombian and indigenous music and see it as more than a decoration. Petrona will always be an influence to the world, and she should be celebrated every single day."

Montero agrees with how crucial it is to honor Martinez's music. "She's said at every concert that the inheritance that she's leaving her children and her grandchildren is the same one that was left to her: this musical legacy. It's a moral, spiritual, and social imperative to protect that, because this is part of our cultural identity, and it's something Colombia needs."

Llerena and the rest of Martinez's children are ensuring that their mother's voice carries into the future, and that bullerengue continues to be heard by new generations across the globe. "What I want people to know is that Petrona Martinez has so much left to give," Llerena says. "We're never going to let these traditions go anywhere, and we're going to keep pushing them forward."

Sheila Nevins

THE MAESTRO

Within approximately six minutes of welcoming a stranger into her sleekly appointed Chelsea penthouse, while graciously hanging a coat and ambling into the kitchen for two bottles of water, Sheila Nevins, documentary producer extraordinaire, has rifled through several current topics of interest, her mind serving them up like a lotto machine. First ball up: men who leave their wives late in life for other men. ("Can you imagine? He leaves for another woman, OK. You're old, they're young, their tits are up, yours are down. ▶

BY MARIA FONTOURA

But this is a different body part. I think it's fascinating.") Second ball up: the recent hostage standoff at a synagogue in a Dallas suburb. ("Wouldn't you love [a story] about the rabbi? Isn't it incredible to think there's somebody so smart that he was able to throw a chair at this guy?") Third ball up: a recently shuttered Broadway musical called *Flying Over Sunset,* which imagines Aldous Huxley, Clare Boothe Luce, and Cary Grant doing LSD together. ("It was about what's in your head. Things come to them that they had managed to suppress or put away. I thought it was great. Got horrible reviews.") Nevins is consumed with stories – the drama of them, what they reveal about us – even the one you are reading right now. At one point well into our chat, she interrupts herself suddenly. "Wouldn't it be great if I died tonight?" she muses, eyes widening. "Then you could say" – she pauses, stretching out her hand like she's gesturing to a theater marquee – " 'The Last Interview.' " She lingers over the word "last," gazing far out onto the horizon beyond the floor-to-ceiling windows of her apartment, over the west side of Manhattan and into a future where she has just died for the sake of my story. A satisfied grin unfolds over her face.

"WOULDN'T IT BE GREAT IF I DIED TONIGHT?" NEVINS SAYS, STRETCHING OUT HER HAND. "THEN YOU COULD SAY, 'THE LAST INTERVIEW.' "

So it goes with Nevins, the 82-year-old superproducer who built HBO's documentary division from the ground up in the early Eighties, and has done as much as filmmakers like D.A. Pennebaker and Errol Morris to advance the form. Over her 38 years with the network, she brought in, greenlit, and otherwise presided over more than 1,000 documentaries, from the Peeping Tom series *Real Sex* and *Taxicab Confessions* to weighty features like Spike Lee's *4 Little Girls,* about the 1963 bombing of an Alabama church, and Laura Poitras' Edward Snowden thriller, *Citizenfour,* bringing a high-low sensibility and raw entertainment value to a genre that had once been seen as dryly educational at best. Talking with Nevins in person, it all makes sense – the sheer range of her interests, the freight-train productivity. Her mind is as restless as it is capacious, her flair for the dramatic almost a bloodlust.

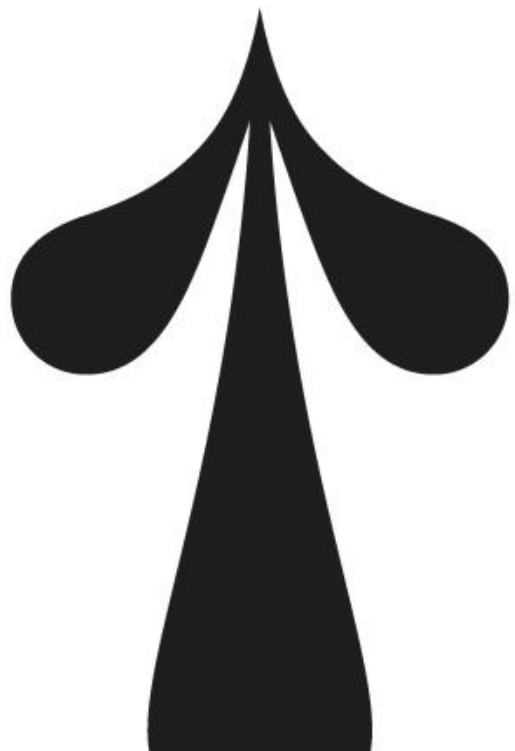
We've sat down on this gray January day to talk about Nevins' life and career, for which the word "illustrious" may have been invented. But despite a body of work so heralded that HBO's documentary trophy room – loaded with Emmys, Peabodys, Oscars, and more – has been dubbed the Holy Shrine of Sheila, Nevins insists that she is not successful. It quickly becomes apparent that this is no faux humility. (Worth noting: If her 32 individual Emmys – the most won by any one person – are anywhere in her home, they are not on display.) Like all truly ambitious people, she is not content to sit on a high perch of her own making and look down. "I'm always working," she says. "Always thinking of something to do next." But there are other factors at play. Nevins' 2017 exit from HBO was publicly positioned as a voluntary retirement, but [*Cont. on 80*]

THE PHENOM

Lily James

In the run-up to playing Pamela Anderson in the Hulu miniseries *Pam & Tommy*, the London-based actor Lily James had to submit an application to the State Department so she could enter the U.S. for filming. And the bureaucrat on whose desk that application landed took one look at it, squinted, and said . . . no. • "I got denied," James groans. "I wanted to live the lifestyle and get a tan and go to Malibu and try and absorb the American feel. Maybe they were thinking, 'Well, *you* shouldn't ▶

BY AMY NICHOLSON



play Pamela Anderson – look at you.' "

Anderson, it's true, is buxom, pillow-faced, and platinum. James is lean, angular, and brunette, though her naturally dark locks startle fans of her series of onscreen blondes: wildling Lady Rose MacClare in *Downton Abbey*, restless waitress Debora in *Baby Driver*, a younger Meryl Streep in *Mamma Mia! Here We Go Again*, and her breakout starring role in *Cinderella* in 2015, which she unexpectedly won after auditioning for one of the wicked stepsisters.

But lucky for her, and us, the U.S. government changed its mind. So here James sits sipping a gin and tonic at the Polo Lounge in Beverly Hills, her pale-lavender nails clashing playfully against her black leather jacket, discussing the show that's launched her career into the stratosphere.

Pam & Tommy tracks the tumultuous first two years of Anderson's marriage to Mötley Crüe drummer Tommy Lee, from their ecstasy-fueled four-day courtship in Cancún to her public humiliation as their personal sex tape was stolen and then sold online. James delivers a charismatic, funny, and poignant portrait, capturing Anderson just as she was hoping to retire her *Baywatch* swimsuit for motherhood and mainstream success. In one standout monologue, Anderson aspires to a career like Jane Fonda – "this badass, sex-bomb, anti-war, workout-video-selling actress chick" – which will never come to pass because of a toxic mix of slut-shaming, scandal-mongering, paparazzi madness, and public mockery.

"A lot of people don't know the true story of what happened," James, 32, says. "And within that, the bigger themes of privacy and sexism and exploitation into the birth of the internet. It sort of simultaneously collided with this huge change in the world – the point of no return – and impacted the kind of culture we have today."

Of course, James' outer Anderson initially got much of the attention. Her physical transformation into the 13-time *Playboy* cover girl took over three hours of spackle a day: wigs, blue contacts, teeth, facial prosthetics, spray tan, fake tattoos, fake birthmarks, and a set of 34DD breasts that were glued and airbrushed to her chest. ("Just incredible," James says. "You'd never have known the difference.") When she'd leave her trailer, people looked at her differently. She felt at once desired and invisible beneath the full get-up. It took her six months to build up Anderson's muscle tone and nearly as long to master her accent, a half-Canadian, half-Cali rasp that was "lower and more mature than I thought it'd be."

James studied Anderson like she was prepping for an AP exam, mastering her head toss, widened eyes, and swaying torso. But she also focused on Anderson's intelligence and sense of humor. James watched all of her interviews, devoured all six of her books, even read her poetry: *When did I go from a curious little girl, to an insatiable woman? Girl on the run… Femme fatale… devoted and… divided.*

"I FELT THE PRESSURE OF TRYING TO DO JUSTICE TO THIS WOMAN. WHAT HAPPENED TO PAM WAS SO WRONG."

"I felt the pressure of trying to do justice to this woman," James says.

JAMES HERSELF is a study in contradictions. The Surrey-born actor reveres larger-than-life characters who live loud and unapologetically, and considers herself a flexible free spirit who races after the romantic. "I'm like water," James says. "I like to take you on, or I can dribble out on the floor and end up like a puddle." Yet, her colleagues see a driven, methodical perfectionist – the valedictorian of the backlot – willing to work as hard as it takes to play the kind of fanciful dreamers she claims to be. Her smile is slightly dizzy, as if she just stumbled off a roller coaster. Yet, inside of her, you sense a racehorse who, if not pushed enough, might just grab the whip herself. Asked what time period she'd live in given the chance, James immediately says World War II, as she'd love the mental clarity of focusing on the fight to survive. Then she realizes mid-sentence that it sounds "so sadistic."

Still, there's a Californian hippy-dippiness in James' DNA that was present even before she arrived in Los Angeles. She sleeps with a black topaz in her hand to lower anxiety, started a dream journal during Covid (in a recent nightmare, she was a toddler serial killer), and dabbles in shamanic healing, where, over Zoom, her instructor connected her to the spirit of her grandmother's dog.

That grandmother was an American actress named Helen Horton, best known today as the voice of Mother in *Alien*. (She's the bitch when Ripley spits "You bitch!") "I idolized her," James says. "Amazing bone structure." They share a jaw line, though James doesn't think hers is as strong. Horton married a Scot and planted the family tree in the U.K., where she took over from Vivien Leigh in the London production of *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Lily's father, a good-looking actor and musician, returned to his mother's roots in L.A. and spent the Seventies getting high on Sunset Boulevard – "He was basically Tommy Lee," James jokes – until a car accident scarred his face.

Growing up, James was fascinated by her father's constant guitar strumming and silly accents and stories of Hollywood, which "felt very mythical." Yet, she was more obsessed with her mother's books about castle-shaped academies where precocious girls pranked their teachers. At 11, she persuaded her parents to ship her off to a performing-arts boarding school.

She used to dream she'd become a singer like Janis Joplin or Carole King, a folksy type who, in another life, might have passed a doobie to her dad in Topanga Canyon. At the last minute, she decided to study acting at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama in London because she thought it would be an even harder challenge. Not long after she enrolled, her father died. He lives on in her stage name, which reworks his first name into her last. (Her birth name "Lily Thomson" had already been poached by a circus performer.)

After turning heads in *Cinderella*, James made a point of trying to shake off the Disney princess. She told the press that on her way to the film's Berlin Film Festival premiere she had to pull over and pee in a gas station in her pale-pink Christian Dior gown. Following the glamorous press tour, she went backpacking in Southeast Asia, where she slept in huts that cost two pounds a night. Soon enough, though, she took on a series of roles a serious British starlet is supposed to take, primarily period pieces about plucky girls braving the Blitz (*Darkest Hour*, *The Exception*) with a dash of high-toned theater (*The Seagull, Romeo and Juliet*), buttressed by a couple of bustles (*Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* and *War & Peace*). Edgar Wright's *Baby Driver* al-

James as Pam (inset left), and as herself in Los Angeles

ERICA PARISE/HULU. PREVIOUS SPREAD AND THIS SPREAD: HAIR STYLED BY DANILO FOR THE WALL GROUP. MAKEUP BY NINA PARK FOR KAPLANA NYC. STYLED BY REBECCA CORBIN MURRAY FOR THE WALL GROUP. STYLED ON SET BY NATALIE HOSELTON.

PREVIOUS SPREAD: TOP AND PANTS BY DION LEE. NECKLACE BY MAGDA BUTRYM. THIS SPREAD: TOP AND SKIRT BY MARCIA. SHOES BY ILIO SMERALDO.

lowed James to shimmy into the 21st century, but that was a movie about a guy and a car that stuck her girlfriend character in the back seat.

"You come to understand how people think of you," James says. "That's very useful, what that fantasy idea of you is." She saw two options: Plant roots as the definitive English rose, or start flashing her thorns. "I was ready for a transformational role, something I didn't really think I could pull off."

She created one for herself in the lovelorn Linda Radlett, center of last year's terrific BBC miniseries *The Pursuit of Love* (based on Nancy Mitford's bitingly witty 1945 coming-of-age novel), which James also produced. Yet, outside of the worlds she created, James found herself in a similar position to Anderson in 1995: sick of being typecast and eager for her real work to begin. She'd even had a brush with the gossip rags. While she'd carefully kept her five-year relationship with *Dr. Who*'s Matt Smith low-key until the couple split in 2020, a paparazzi photograph published soon after of her appearing to kiss her married *Pursuit* co-star Dominic West brought a whole new kind of scrutiny.

"Women in the public eye at some point experience some sort of difficult situation in that relationship between privacy and your life being in the tabloids," James says. "It was a lot. It's a story as old as time."

Today, James even seems to empathize with Anderson's vow to never watch the show. But what does she hope Anderson might see in her performance if she ever hits play? James can't answer. She doesn't want to put words in Anderson's mouth. What's clear is that she fell deeply into the role. Her co-star Sebastian Stan, who plays Tommy, only remembered halfway through filming that James was English. "Every time she was speaking to me, she was speaking like Pamela," he says. "It wasn't until the end of the shoot that I actually met Lily." Out of costume at a producer's birthday party, James went unrecognized by one of the show's own directors.

"The more I researched, the more personal it felt," James explains. "What happened to [Pam] was so wrong.

"I lost perspective on who I was," she says. "I felt pretty burnt out after. It was a really tough shoot." But in this courtyard, her gin and tonic drained and the night air rustling the palm leaves, she seems recovered enough that she'd gladly do it all again. "What's the point in doing anything if you get an opportunity like this," she says, "other than to run with it?"

TRIBUTES

Ten of today's top artists on the pioneering women who have shaped their sound, provided an example, and inspired them to break down barriers

by Saweetie

Superstar-in-the-making Saweetie met Cher while doing a campaign for MAC Cosmetics. But the two artists' connection – and Cher's influence on Saweetie – goes much deeper.

Cher

What I love about Cher is that she doesn't give a fuck! In a world where people are constantly trying to tell women how to look, what to eat, what to wear, and how smart they can be, what you see with Cher is what you get. The women who raised me have that same demeanor, and it's infectious. My first encounter with Cher was as a toddler, cleaning with my *lola* ["grandmother" in the Filipino language]. "Believe" had just come out and my grandmother, who used to babysit me, would have Cher blasting through the speakers as she swept the floor with her Filipino broom. I would have my little broom, helping her clean. Growing up, I sang "Believe" at the top of my lungs, and that same Filipino broom was my microphone.

Cher has such an imprint on my brain because she was a major part of my household growing up. In the Filipino culture, karaoke is a big deal, and my family and I would often perform her songs. But aside from her music, I always loved how she managed and embodied her energy. For one, I love a good costume, and Cher's costumes are ones I try to emulate at my shows. The way she could be naked and yet still classy; the fact that she has always been able to exude that duality is majestic to me.

When I finally met her, it was simply amazing. We shared a day together on set for the MAC Cosmetics campaign, and she gave me a lot of wisdom and became a mentor to me. Her energy is so young, and she still looks so good! Regardless of celebrity, when you meet someone, you give them an experience. You know the quote "I may not remember what you said, what you wore, but I remember how you made me feel"? I meet a lot of people all of the time, but my experience with her was one of the most memorable.

Cher is the queen of costumes and looks, and her overall aura is immaculate, but what stood out the most to me was her honesty. She made me feel welcomed. She and I ▶

NORMAN SEEFF

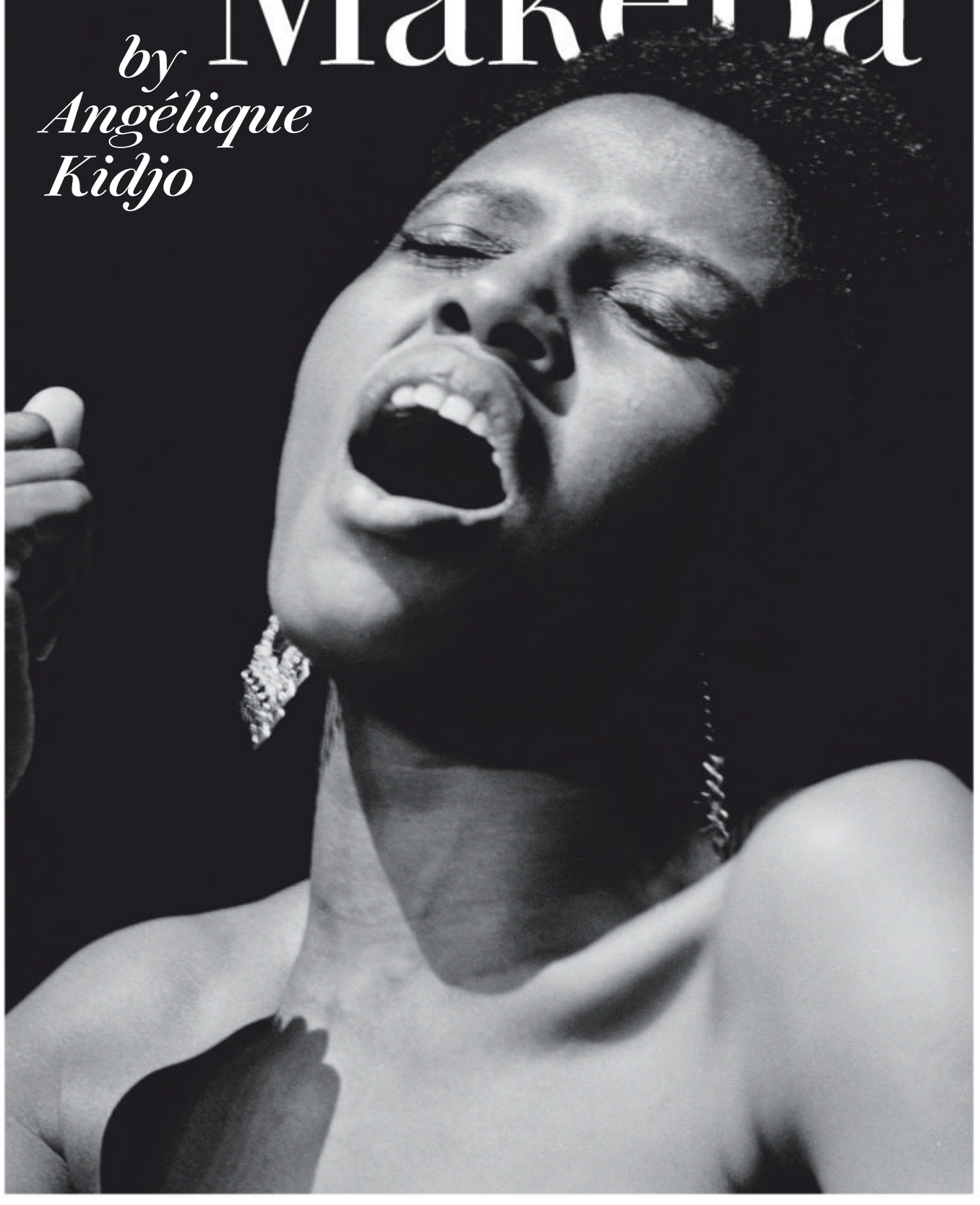
have a lot of parallels in our careers, especially with people counting us out. People often think I'm confident, which I am, but there are some days that I do doubt myself. I really want to get into that Cher attitude of "I'm me, take it or leave it." I'm 80 percent there, but I'm still working on it.

So it was so interesting to hear her, someone who's so iconic, share her battles and personal struggles. To me, she's everything: She's an angel, a queen. But she said, "Trust me, I went through it too," and that gave me inspiration to keep going despite what critics say about me.

I call her "Mama Cher," but she feels like a big sister, or a close homegirl. We still talk every now and again, and she even had me over for dinner once, which was amazing. Womanhood to me is about strength, knowing ourselves, and love. It's important for women to fall in love with every aspect of themselves, whether it's physical, mental, or spiritual. To me, Cher is the epitome of that. I have pictures of all of the women who inspire me on the walls throughout my house. I see Cher every morning, and it serves as a reminder to myself that "girl, you got it." AS TOLD TO MEAGAN JORDAN

Miriam Makeba

by Angélique Kidjo



REPORTERS ASSOCIES/GAMMA-RAPHO/GETTY IMAGES

Benin-born singer Angélique Kidjo remembers her "musical mother," the South African artist-activist Miriam Makeba.

THE FIRST TIME I sang Miriam's music was when my mom and her friends would gather to campaign for women's rights. They transformed one of her songs – it was "The Retreat Song (Jikele Maweni)" – into their anthem, and they put lyrics in my father tongue, Fon. I would sing along. A year later, an album from Miriam arrived with a song called "Malaika" that became my mom's favorite song. I started singing it – I would sing everything phonetically – and it became the glue between my two big musical influences: my mother and Miriam. My mom loved "Malaika" so much that when she passed away, I was obliged to sing it. I couldn't even finish it.

There's something about her singing: a righteousness and a determination. "Listen to me!" You cannot *not* listen to her. Her voice commands not just listening but also understanding and getting up and doing something. The sound she makes, it comes from her gut, almost like she was possessed. It took me years to get that sound out. She would be like, "I have a stage and I'm telling you I am suffering, and my people are suffering. I will entertain you, but you will feel my pain, and if you're human, you'll do something about it with me." That triggered my activism.

In 1989, I was asked to be her opening act in Paris. During my soundcheck, she walked onstage, and I was frozen. I was shaking from emotion. She said, "Hello, little girl! You have a nice voice!" After that, every time she would see me, she'd say, "You're doing good!" It was a friendship between a daughter and a musical mother. She said, "Never accept anyone to put you in the category of 'world music.' All music is in the world. Everything people listen to comes from Africa. Why are we put in the ghetto of 'world music?'" She gave me a lot of advice.

Her legacy is going to live on because a lot of people are singing Miriam Makeba songs. A new generation is rediscovering her. I want my music to carry her legacy and to sing to her every time I'm onstage. AS TOLD TO JULYSSA LOPEZ

Missy Elliott

by Flo Milli

SACHA WALDMAN/TRUNK ARCHIVE

Flo Milli has established herself as one of the most exciting new rappers alive – and in her fearlessness and adventurous rhymes, she's a clear heiress of her hero, Missy Elliott.

WHEN I DROPPED my mixtape, [Missy Elliott] was one of the first people to say she loved me and that I was a dope artist. I'm still learning about myself as an artist. I'm trying different things. I'm still studying. She's definitely one of the people I study.

Missy was a part of my childhood, completely. Being a little girl watching music videos on MTV and BET, she was always there. I like so many of her songs, but I have to say "She's a Bitch" is my favorite. I love the beat. It makes me want to dance. It gives me a nostalgic feeling, but I feel like if it came out today it would still be just as hot as it was back then. The whole procession of the song is my personality. They're calling her a bitch, but she don't care.

I remember "Work It." It was so creative, the way she took a part of the song and rewound it. I don't remember too many people doing anything like that. I feel like she started a lot of trends.

Missy was very different from a lot of other female rappers in her time, and she was so supportive [of them]. She still is to this day. I definitely get inspiration from her, even being in the studio just watching her videos.

I see her influence everywhere. When you look at her videos and her aesthetic, she made it cool to just be *her*. She didn't have to have big titties, a big ass. She was just completely herself, authentically who she is. She always knew what she wanted. That fearlessness and individuality has played a role in how a lot of artists are now. Her videos were so creative and out of this world. Those ideas were spread upon the generation we have now.

I've never met her before, but I look forward to meeting her one day. And I would love to collaborate with her. I want Missy to know that her spirit is very needed on this Earth. She's a legend, an icon. She will never be forgotten. Her music will live on forever. **AS TOLD TO BRITTANY SPANOS**

ICONS & INFLUENCES

Celia Cruz

by Ivy Queen

Puerto Rican reggaeton pioneer Ivy Queen heard a clarion call in the salsa legend's historic voice.

IN EVERY INTERVIEW I've ever done, the person who I always refer to as my biggest influence is Celia Cruz. For me, Celia had a completely unique, distinct voice, and her look was spectacular. She was a woman surrounded by men at Fania Records – and when Celia would make her big entrance, all the men had to bow down because Mother had arrived to take control.

The tone of her voice – there won't ever be a replica of it. That's something I've always identified with, because in the beginning of my career, there weren't any music videos, and it took some time for people to realize I was a woman. My voice was always raspy and strong – later, once people saw the attitude and the braids and the nails, they understood the whole combination. But at first, they thought I was a man. I was like, "Oh, my God, why are they telling me I sound like a boy?" Then I realized it's my signature. Celia taught me that having a singular, particular voice is a gift.

The Fania All-Stars did a concert in Africa, and I have it on DVD. I watch it all the time. I love this moment when Celia walks onstage wearing these spectacular heels and a spectacular dress and her amazing wig. She starts to sing "Quimbara," and all the men grab their mics and line up behind her to sing backup vocals. Héctor Lavoe, Cheo Feliciano, all of them move to the corners so that Celia can have her full moment. To me, that is the maximum sign of respect. That DVD is going to go to my daughter one day. I want her to know about women who gave everything to pave the way in the music industry.

"Quimbara," of course, is one of my favorite songs. I had to sing it at a tribute concert we did for her in Miami, and I was so nervous – you don't want to mess up. I'll never sound like Celia, ever, but I wanted everything to be impeccable, for the visuals to be the most beautiful. As soon as that song comes on, just hearing the tone of her voice, the drums, it turns on my African and Caribbean roots. That's going to be my song forever.

Celia has been an icon that's surpassed the barriers of time – and of life itself. They just made a Barbie doll of Celia Cruz. Her legacy is untouchable. Everyone talks about her. She's iconic. If you mention major women artists in the world, Celia is always there. She's had so much of an impact – not just because of her voice, but because of how she fought back, how she struggled because of her color, because of how she looked.

Her influence is felt even though she's not here with us anymore. There are avenues and streets with Celia Cruz's name on them. Her story is about resistance and love, and it's really beautiful. **AS TOLD TO JULYSSA LOPEZ**

ALEXIS RODRIGUEZ-DUARTE IN COLLABORATION WITH TICO TORRES

Dolly Parton

by Kesha

Pop rebel Kesha worshiped Dolly Parton growing up, and the country queen has been a "guiding light" throughout her own career. Eventually, they even got to work together.

WHEN I WAS a little kid, my mom came back from the chiropractor and told me, "Oh, I just saw Dolly." And I said, "What's Dolly?" And she was like, "Oh, the queen." And I asked, "What are you talking about? The Queen Dolly?" Then, a couple of years later, my mom told me she had written a song that Dolly Parton had recorded called "Old Flames (Can't Hold a Candle to You)." I just thought that was the coolest thing in the world. And I still do. Dolly didn't seem like a real human to me. It was almost like when you talk about unicorns. And I remember as a little kid, it was like she was this fable, like untouchable, unhuman, just badass.

The very first time I ever heard her music was when we were watching *9 to 5,* and that's when I actually became aware of who she was, what she looked like, how she's this multifaceted artist of every genre, and so funny.

Before my album *Rainbow,* I thought people thought I was fun, but I sure as hell didn't think they thought I was talented. And I sure as hell didn't think I was talented enough to ask the queen to sing a song with me.

When I was approaching *Rainbow,* I said, "You know what? If I don't ask, the answer's no." So I just thought, "Fuck it, I'm going to ask Dolly Parton to sing a song with me." I wept like a baby when she said she would. I'm getting teary-eyed right now.

It was a real corner turned in my mind once she said she would collaborate with me. I made a rule to not do any music – no matter how successful it could be, no matter how many people would love it – that Dolly Parton wouldn't fuck with. I don't ever want to put out any music that Dolly Parton wouldn't enjoy or listen to, or find some humor in. She's so much of a guiding light, and she has no idea.

At first I just thought she was fabulous, hilarious, and obviously very, very talented. And now I realize that it's so much more than that. Her graciousness, her generosity, and the way that she will answer any question with so much respect – but she does not let people ever get one over on her. I always ask myself, "What would Dolly Parton do?" any time I don't know what to do or say in an interview. I want the tattoo across my wrist – like, WHAT WOULD DOLLY DO?

AS TOLD TO ALISON WEINFLASH

JACK MANNING/"THE NEW YORK TIMES"/REDUX

18+

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Alanis Morissette

by Alessia Cara

Pop artist Alessia Cara first listened to Alanis Morissette in middle school – and the uncompromising singer and songwriter's raw honesty has been an inspiration ever since.

I FIRST HEARD Alanis in sixth grade. We were doing this school project, and our teacher was teaching us about different themes in writing. He was talking about irony, so obviously, the most classic song about irony is "Ironic," by her, and I remember he played the music video on the Smart Board projector. I remember going home and researching her and finding *Jagged Little Pill* for the first time.

Jagged Little Pill is extremely honest. It feels like you're listening to a diary or something that you almost shouldn't be hearing. I always like when women are unapologetically honest and raw in their lyrics, so that album was really influential to me as a writer. I tend to be a very shy person, and especially when I was coming into being a songwriter, I held back a lot, just because I was afraid of being too honest or too negative. I always felt like I had to throw a positive spin on my records, especially the first one. Going through a lot of pain and heartbreak in my late teen years and in my early twenties made me realize how important it is to be unfiltered and just get to the bottom of what you're saying. While Alanis wrote a lot about other people, I think she projected her own faults in a way that felt very real. I took a lot from that, and I think I still do now. I always have that in the back of my mind when I'm writing my own songs.

As a pop singer and as a pop girl myself, I think we get sucked into the idea of note perfection and quality perfection, but I always admired the fact that she wasn't always on pitch. She favored emotion over perfection. She still has such an amazing voice and great pitch, but sometimes she wasn't afraid to go off or to let her voice crack. All of those little holes, I always felt those were really, really impactful – 10 times more impactful than something that sounded sonically perfect.

I think the industry places a lot of importance on women constantly having to prove themselves: It's a thing that we feel a lot of pressure to do as women. She's a great case study for how you can be yourself and not have to follow the pop-star thing. Honesty has the most longevity over anything. Her music still holds up nowadays, and it's because of that honesty.

AS TOLD TO JULYSSA LOPEZ

THIS PAGE: STEVE DOUBLE/CAMERA PRESS/REDUX. OPPOSITE PAGE: THE ESTATE OF DAVID GAHR/GETTY IMAGES

Peggy Seeger

by Rhiannon Giddens

Peggy Seeger is an accomplished artist in her own right, following an unconventional path that has inspired Rhiannon Giddens' life and music.

I REMEMBER KNOWING Pete Seeger's work; that name is such a household name. Then I got to see his half-sister Peggy. That cemented it for me. I started listening to her records and following her. She was just uncompromising. I know she suffered for it and didn't have the career that I think she should have had. She had a great career, and she's still making beautiful music and still performing. She still has a great fan base. She's putting on concerts, she's teaching. She's sharing with different generations. But I think because she was uncompromising, she didn't follow the track of a lot of folk stars into the commercial world.

She's kind of been a lodestar for me. I've taken classes from her. I've sung on her show. I won't say she's a fairy godmother, but she's been one of those mentors where I look to her like, "What do you think?" I think she should be more well-known. I think part of what happened with her is that she was ahead of her time. She didn't play the games. She never did follow any playbook. She's so clear in her beliefs and doesn't back down. She's definitely getting more kudos in her silver years. Let's build on that. Let's give it all to her. AS TOLD TO BRITTANY SPANOS

Violeta Parra

by Cat Power

Chan Marshall, a.k.a. Cat Power, reveres the late Chilean singer-songwriter, who revitalized her country's folk-music traditions and wrote the modern standard "Gracias a la Vida" before her death in 1967.

I WAS IN Santiago, Chile, probably 2006, and I went to a used-record store where this guy said, "I think you'll really like this." It was a collection of songs where she doesn't have any backing production; it's just her and this instrument that sounds like a guitalele, and you hear her right in your ear. I'm not fluent in Spanish, but it sounds like she's singing right to your soul, right to your secret spirit. When she was covering traditional Latin American songs, she was bringing that to the contemporary scene, just like Dylan and Nina Simone did.

I think the world now hasn't heard of her for two reasons. One, the corporate record industry doesn't like anything from the past – they always need the new artists and the new pop and the new publishing. They need something to fuel the machine. And two, a political activist singing songs isn't going to pull in dough. *And* she's a Latin woman. *And* she's solo, not even electric. I know that she's definitely part of my DNA now. "Gracias a la Vida" is absolutely 100 percent my favorite recording of hers. It's just so familiar when you hear her sing it. She stops time with her voice. I just got chills. AS TOLD TO ANGIE MARTOCCIO

BoA

by Aespa

IN 2000, at age 13, BoA became the first solo artist to debut with SM Entertainment. Years later, Aespa – the K-pop powerhouse's latest girl group, with members Karina, 21, Giselle, 21, Winter, 21, and Ningning, 19 – grew up listening to her music. More recently, they've worked together on new music (including a remake of K-pop classic "Dreams Come True"), and Karina and Winter joined BoA in the supergroup Got the Beat.

Karina: I've been a fan of BoA as long as I can remember.

Winter: I saw her perform "Only One" when I was in elementary school, and was amazed by her stage presence. I remember once, we tried singing and dancing to "Amazing Kiss," and it was so hard. It's amazing to see how she nails every detail of choreography, facial expressions, and gestures onstage.

Giselle: When we filmed the music video for "Dreams Come True," she came to set and gave directions. She was so clear on how she envisioned everything. You could tell she knew every single detail that was going on behind the camera.

Ningning: My favorite BoA song is "Fox," from her *Kiss My Lips* album. I loved it so much that I listened to it on repeat during my early trainee days.

Giselle: To me, BoA's most iconic moment is when she walks upside down as part of the choreography of "Woman." My personal favorite, though, is "Atlantis Princess," the song I auditioned with. The song starts with "I wonder what is at the end of the faraway sea," and that stuck with me.

Winter: I performed that for my first evaluation as a trainee!

Ningning: When I listen to her music, her voice feels like a magnet. Most importantly, when I'm listening to BoA's music, I feel the girl power.

Karina: When she debuted, there weren't many K-pop female solo artists who sang and danced. She even went to Japan and became successful there. There must have been lonely days. She never loses her passion, and people see that. AS TOLD TO KRISTINE KWAK

FROM TOP: GDA/AP IMAGES; SM ENTERTAINMENT

Erykah Badu

by Syd

KENNEDI CARTER

Erykah Badu's pioneering neo-soul was one of the earliest influences on Syd when she was growing up in Los Angeles.

MY MOM IS a huge Erykah fan. We had surround-sound speakers set up all through the house. She had a 300-disc changer, and she had at least two Erykah CDs in there at a time: *Mama's Gun*, *Baduizm*. It was cool waking up on the weekends to music, and it was often Erykah.

She was another thin, beautiful Black woman who I could kind of see myself in, physically. She was the one that I could say I felt like I looked the most like. She was always eclectic, and I grew up in eclectic settings. I have a soft voice, and she does too. She can make it powerful when she wants to, or she can just kind of sit in this chill space, this vibe-y area. I think a lot of people would agree that my voice and my music share a similar energy of Sunday cleaning music, or "Let's light the incense and candles and have some wine" music. It just kind of fits a certain mood.

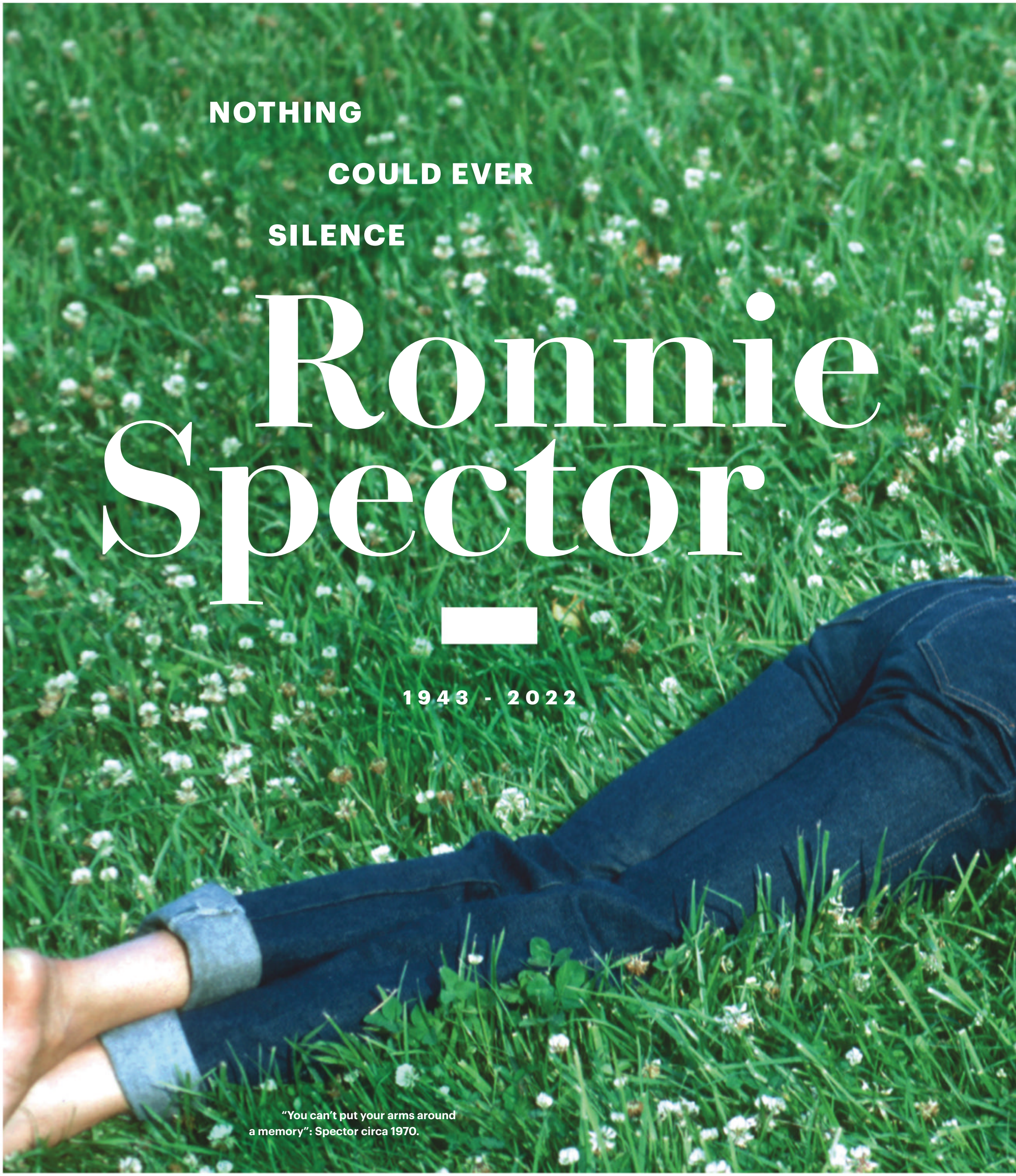
Baduizm is my go-to. But if we're talking about her best songs, it might be "Green Eyes." It might be "Time's a Wastin'." It might be "Cleva." *New Amerykah Part One* was really fire to me, and "The Healer" was one of my go-to's for a minute as well. It's rare that you get an artist who is able to reinvent themselves on their own terms and keep it fresh, but also keep it them. She's able to reinvent herself, and it's all still Erykah.

My first time meeting her was at Coachella in 2011. She was at a party that I was DJ'ing. Mind you, there was nobody at this party. This party was completely empty. This is back in the Odd Future days. It was our first Coachella performance, and somebody from XL Recordings, who put out Tyler, the Creator's first album, had thrown a party and Erykah Badu was there. It was easy to see her walk in, because there's nobody there. I played a deep cut – a Sa-Ra song that she was featured on – just so that *she* knew *I* knew. I just wanted her to know that: *I know you on a deeper level*.

She danced over to me! Turned my volume all the way up! She started dancing by herself. It was amazing. There's a picture of it somewhere. I don't know where it is, but when I find it, I'm going to print it and frame it.

She had me come out and DJ an opening set at a couple of her concerts. One was on New Year's Eve. She gave me $100 for New Year's – she gave everybody a hundred-dollar bill – and I got to introduce her to my mom and show her who put me on.

I've always admired people who just knew who they were from the jump and never had to question it. I spent a lot of my years questioning and wondering in my mind and searching. It's inspiring to watch someone trust who they are and just roll with it. She makes what she needs to make, when she needs to make it. She's not out here trying to stay relevant, and yet she's done it. AS TOLD TO BRITTANY SPANOS



"You can't put your arms around a memory": Spector circa 1970.

HER STRENGTH AND RESILIENCE WERE AS LEGENDARY AS THAT VOICE. REMEMBERING THE SPANISH HARLEM INCIDENT WHO BLASTED INTO THE WORLD AND FUCKED IT UP FOREVER

By Rob Sheffield

RONNIE SPECTOR was the loudest noise of the 20th century, the queen of the New York dolls, the ultimate rock & roll goddess. She belted her way into history with the Ronettes' 1963 hit "Be My Baby," flexing the bombastic power of her raw young voice, all brash passion and streetwise bravado. She made a bold promise in the first verse of her first hit: "We'll make them turn their heads, every place we go." She lived up to that promise her whole life. Ronnie Spector was the Spanish Harlem incident who blasted into the world and fucked it up forever. Her voice lives in the soul of anyone who's heard it, which is why we're still grieving the news of her death from cancer, at 78, on Jan. 12.

"Be My Baby" was the hit that took three teenage girls from the streets of Spanish Harlem and made them legends, all glam mascara and fire-hazard beehive hairdos and the unquenchable craving in Ronnie's voice. That song can still transform anyone who hears it, just as it always transformed her. As she said a couple of years ago, "It just does something to my whole body." Her hair was taller and meaner and scarier than all four Shangri-La's combined, plus the drummer from the Honeycombs. When Madonna first blew up in 1985, she proclaimed, "I like to look the way Ronnie Spector sounded: sexy, hungry, totally trashy."

In 2016, ROLLING STONE's David Browne asked if she had a bucket list. She said, "I've outgrown that. Now it's a 'fuck it' list." But Ronnie always had that fuck-it snarl in her voice, even as an ingenue. Even in a non-hit like "You Came, You Saw, You Conquered," you can hear that "fuck it," all street-punk aggro wrapped up in teen romance. Has any singer sounded so tough?

Contributing editor ROB SHEFFIELD *wrote about Charlie Watts in the October issue.*

She needed every bit of that toughness. When she married her producer, Phil Spector, she thought her dreams were coming true. As she wrote in her excellent 1990 memoir, *Be My Baby,* "He was the only guy I ever met who could talk me into an orgasm." But he held her prisoner in their mansion, behind guards and barbed wire. She finally left in 1974, her career in ruins, but Ronnie fought her way to the musical redemption she deserved.

So many artists have built their legends around worshipping Ronnie Spector – or just trying to live up to her spirit. The first one, obviously, was Phil Spector, who made his best records for the Ronettes. The Beatles and the Stones basically invaded America just as an excuse to meet Ronnie. The New York Dolls invented punk by trying to imitate her. Then there's Bruce Springsteen and David Bowie. (Should we mention Eddie Money? Of course we should.)

Elton John's glam anthem "Bennie and the Jets" is his fan letter to her, or at least that's how I've always heard it. The girls in the song are Candy and Ronnie and Bennie, an in-joke since Bennett was her birth name. Bob Seger told ROLLING STONE's Andy Greene that "Be My Baby" was the song that inspired "Night Moves" – the song he sings alone in the dark, when he's "hummin' a song from 1962." (It came out in 1963, but never argue with Bob Seger.)

Brian Wilson once told me how Ronnie's voice changed his life, in a 1999 phone interview. I asked him where "Good Vibrations" came from. He said, "God. And Phil Spector. God, Phil Spector, and the Beach Boys all combined." It was midafternoon, so naturally Brian was watching *The People's Court,* but when he started talking about "Be My Baby," he actually muted the TV. The first time he heard that song in the car, he pulled over to cry. With "Good Vibrations," he was just trying to echo her. "It was like hearing 'Be My Baby' for the first time," he told me. "I knew God was with us when we were doing it. It's no 'Be My Baby,' but it's a good record."

In 2016, 'Rolling Stone' asked Spector if she had a bucket list. "I've outgrown that," she replied. "Now it's a 'fuck it' list."

She grew up in Harlem, surrounded by a huge biracial family, but with her African American and Cherokee heritage, she always felt like an outsider. She formed a group with her sister and cousin to sing at sock hops and bar mitzvahs. But it all changed when she met Phil Spector, who threw all his genius into "Be My Baby." She rehearsed her vocals in the ladies' room at JFK Airport (then named Idlewild) before flying across the country to sing it for Phil, hoping to sound "like a girl Elvis." She defined rock with "Be My Baby"; she defined roll with "Walking in the Rain," the wistful ballad where she yearns for her dream boy. Phil put an actual thunderstorm on the record. I still can't decide which Ronettes hit I love more, after a lifetime of listening.

The Ronettes (with Spector, center) in 1964. Right: In the studio, 1965.

But her marriage became a nightmare, as her husband refused to let her out of the house. He made her watch *Citizen Kane* over and over. (The first time she ever dared to say the word "no" to him came when she refused to see *Kane* anymore.) He buried the Ronettes' career, not letting her near the stage or the studio, and didn't even release some of her finest work, like the heartbreaking 1966 ballad "I Wish I Never Saw the Sunshine."

"Be My Baby" whisked her to the big time, and then to the lowest lows of adult heartbreak. By the Eighties, when she got dropped by her label and couldn't get a gig, she figured she'd bombed out of the business. Then one night, she got a call in her kitchen, some guy named Eddie Money, asking, "What are you doing these days?" She said, "The dishes. When can we get started?"

Eddie was a meat-and-potatoes rocker who wanted her to sing on his new single "Take Me Home Tonight," which went on to become one of the immortal hits of the Eighties. It sounded bizarre on the radio at the time and still does – there's no attempt to explain who Ronnie is. Eddie says, "Just like Ronnie sang," and that's when Ronnie steps in to utter those four magic words: "Be my little baby." That's all it takes. In this song, we hear the most ordinary guy ("Eddie Mahoney" to his mom) get touched by a goddess, as her voice transforms him from a clod into a star. "Take Me Home Tonight" has never left the radio, like "Be My Baby" itself.

Ronnie Spector's voice is everywhere, and it is everything. It's in the way the Jesus and Mary Chain began their classic debut, *Psychocandy,* with the "Be My Baby" drum intro. (They called it "Just Like Honey.") The L.A. hair-metal band

PREVIOUS SPREAD: MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES

Ronnie's Essential Songs

The Ronettes, "Be My Baby" 1963
With Ronnie's roller-coaster vocals over Phil Spector's Wall of Sound, "Be My Baby" was an instant classic. "It was like having your mind revamped," Brian Wilson said of the track.

The Ronettes, "Baby I Love You" 1963
The follow-up to "Be My Baby" featured more of Ronnie Spector's signature vocal dives. "Oh, tell me that you feel the same," she pleads, overcome with emotion.

"Try Some, Buy Some" 1971
Spector's voice fits in perfectly as she sings about opening her eyes and falling in love (with God this time, since her buddy George Harrison wrote it).

Eddie Money, "Take Me Home Tonight" 1986
Money demoed this track with Martha Davis of the Motels, interpolating lyrics from "Be My Baby." Later, Spector stepped in and helped turn the tune into a smash.

"How Can You Mend a Broken Heart" 2016
"I went in the ladies' room and cried my eyes out," Spector said of this sparse, gorgeous Bee Gees cover from her final album. "Because that song is about my life, you know?"

Poison began their debut album with the same beat, as if Sunset Strip glam metal and Scottish feedback are just two different ways to channel Ronnie Spector. Martin Scorsese used "Be My Baby" to kick off his first big movie, *Mean Streets,* the all-time coolest rock & roll movie moment. It's the same beat that begins *Dirty Dancing* and ends *Lost in Translation*. Hal Blaine is on the drums, but Ronnie drives it home: Wherever you hear that beat, you're hearing her.

Her fanboy Joey Ramone produced the beautiful *She Talks to Rainbows*, the 1999 musical comeback she'd spent decades aiming for. When she sang Johnny Thunders' "You Can't Put Your Arms Around a Memory," she made it hers. After that, she was never off her game again. Her excellent 2016 *English Heart* was a set of British Invasion tunes, with one of the all-time great Rolling Stones covers, the gender-flipped "I'd Much Rather Be With the Girls." It was fitting because Mick Jagger did plenty of Ronnie imitations in his early days – just listen to him Ronnie it up in the Stones' first U.S. hit, "Tell Me."

The Beatles always idolized her. When they arrived in the U.S. in 1964, John Lennon spent his first night in New York in his hotel room, calling up radio DJs and asking them to play the Ronettes. She took the Fabs up to Harlem for barbecue ribs; as she said, "Nobody bothered them because they thought they were just some Spanish dorks." When she and her sister double-dated John and George, John whispered, "Ronnie, sing a bit of 'Be My Baby' in my ear.'" "It Won't Be Long" is merely their most explicit Ronettes tribute.

George later wrote a 1971 comeback single for her, "Try Some, Buy Some," with the B side "Tandoori Chicken." She told him, "I don't understand a word of it." He said, "That's OK. I don't either." But the single flopped. As she fumed in her book, "My husband produced 'My Sweet Lord' for George Harrison and 'Instant Karma' for John Lennon, but when it came time to record me, what did he pick? A song about Indian chicken."

The Ronettes finally made it into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame in 2007, so Ronnie had a celebration party in New York. By 2 a.m., as people started grabbing their coats to slip out, she hadn't shown up. I was there with the Yeah Yeah Yeahs, the NYC punks who perfected her glam-trash punk aesthetic, and we weren't leaving – if you think there's a chance Ronnie Spector might walk into a room, would you leave? By 4 o'clock, the stragglers were pretty much down to me and the band, but that's when Ronnie showed up, just to own the room for a few minutes and then breeze on, not a bit surprised to see people dazed at her presence.

Ronnie kept making her music to the end, with her manager and husband of 38 years, Jonathan Greenfield. She settled down in suburban Connecticut, just a few minutes away from her old friend Keith Richards – they loved to hang at his piano and sing together. She was grateful she'd lived long enough to see the #MeToo era. As she told *The Guardian*'s Jenn Pelly, "When I was making my hit records, my ex was always 'the genius' and you felt like: 'Well, who am I?' You felt that small. I'm so glad I'm still on this Earth to see women going out there and saying: 'You can be fabulous like me, you can do anything.'" Her voice still has the power to make anyone feel that power. Rest in "Be My Baby," Ronnie Spector.

FROM LEFT: MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES; DAVID GAHR/GETTY IMAGES

1947–2022

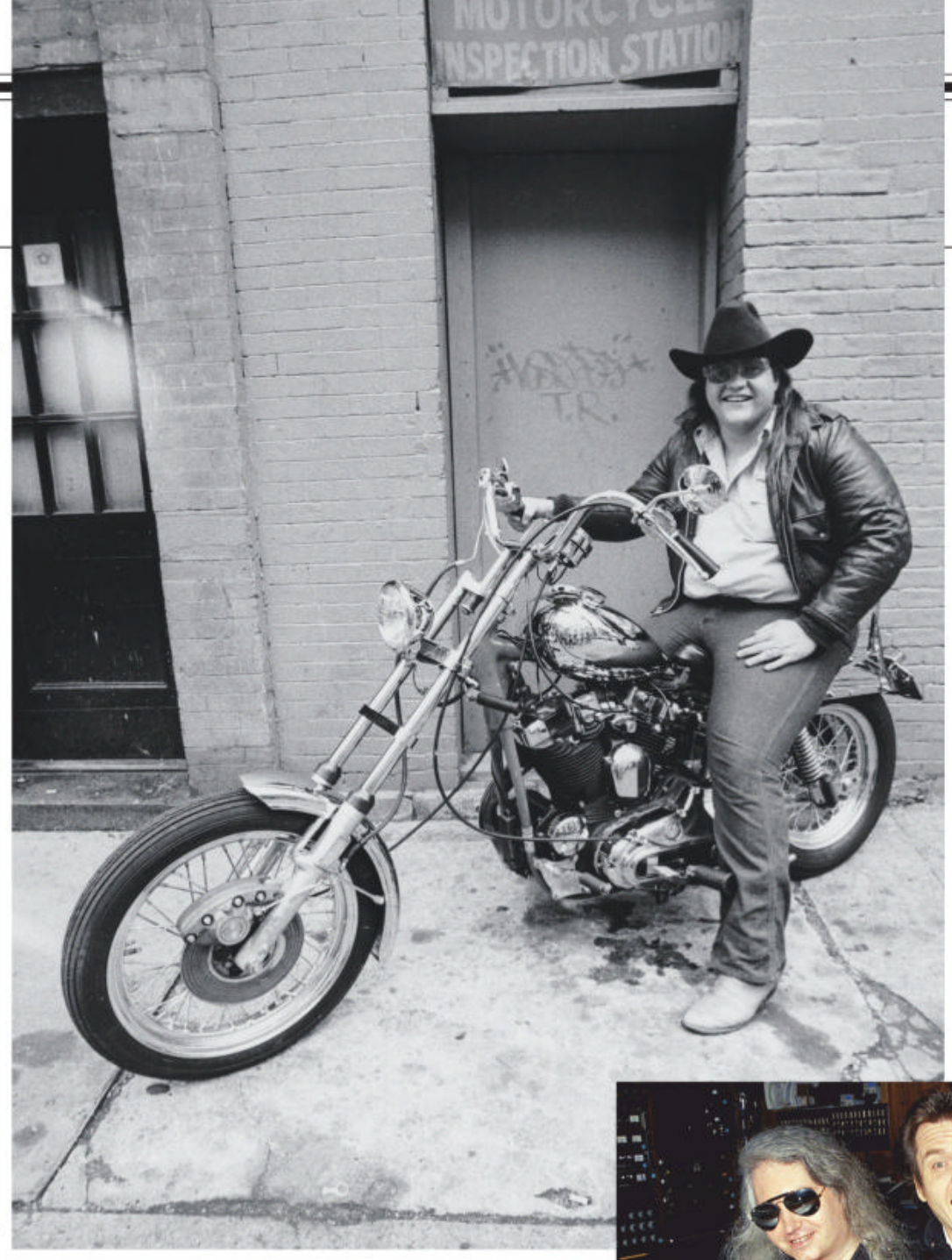
MEAT LOAF

THE FINAL TESTAMENT *of* ROCK'S BIGGEST UNDERDOG

By ANDY GREENE & ERIK HEDEGAARD

IN A NOVEMBER 1978 INTERVIEW WITH "ROLLING STONE," MEAT LOAF TRIED TO explain why he put so much energy into his concerts that he sometimes lost consciousness after the final encore. "I get so possessed by the songs, so wrapped up in the show, that it's like withdrawal when it's over," he said. "I get tired during the show, but I can't stop – and sometimes it gets painful as hell." Pushing through the pain was a theme of Meat Loaf's life. His childhood was marked by violent clashes with his alcoholic father, and the early days of his career were clouded by constant doubts of whether the public would have any interest in the bombastic, operatic rock songs he created with composer Jim Steinman. He proved everyone wrong by selling more than 40 million copies of 1977's *Bat Out of Hell,* but the pressure to craft a follow-up left his voice and psyche shattered. Against all odds, he clawed his way to the top of the charts in 1993 with "I'd Do Anything for Love (But I Won't Do That)," and followed it up by reviving his acting career in *Fight Club* and other films.

MEAT LOAF BACKSTAGE AT ENGLAND'S MANCHESTER APOLLO ON THE 1981 *DEAD RINGER* TOUR



ALL REVVED UP
Left: Meat Loaf in 1978. *Bat Out of Hell* made him a global star that year, but the stress put him on the verge of a nervous breakdown.

THE COMEBACK
Below: After years of bitterness and legal battles, Meat and Jim Steinman (left) reconvened in 1993 to craft the long-awaited *Bat Out of Hell II*.

TIME WARP
Bottom left: Meat on the set of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show,* playing Eddie, a murder victim who belts out "Hot Patootie — Bless My Soul."

He was plagued by health problems in recent years, and died Jan. 20 at 74. No official cause was given, but he was a vocal vaccine skeptic, and there are reports he contracted Covid-19 in his final days. Three years ago, he opened the doors to his Texas home to ROLLING STONE's Erik Hedegaard for an incredible interview that touched on all eras of his life and career. And in April 2021, right after Steinman died, Meat spent two days on the phone with senior writer Andy Greene to look back at the artists' turbulent history together, breaking down at one point to sob. The majority of what he said in these two interviews has never appeared in print. Taken together, they give Meat the chance to tell the story of his life in his own words.

Why did you become a singer? Most people do that to get girls.
Not me. I wanted to play professional football. That is all I wanted to do. No way was I good enough for that, but I didn't want to be a rock & roll star. I still don't want to be a rock & roll star. When *Bat Out of Hell* came out, they wanted to run this ad, "New Star on the Horizon." I said take the "star" out. New *artist*. When people call me a legend, I tell them not to do that. I'm not a legend. I don't pretend to be one. I want to be just normal. I want to be a normal human being.

But you can't be.
Yeah, I can. I sit here, and I'm normal. I watch *Law & Order,* I watch *Blue Bloods*. I am hooked on *The Good Doctor*. It's fantastic.

Do you remember the last thing you cried over?
Nah, but it was yesterday.

It happens that frequently?
Yeah, just all the sudden something will happen. You know, some show I'm watching or some interview. . . . There are dog-food commercials that will make me cry.

Has it always been like that? Even as a kid?
I mean, I'm tough as nails. I grew up in Dallas and got into fights constantly. When I was at North Texas State, I would always end up getting into a fight with some guy from Oklahoma. When it was over, he wished he hadn't.

Did you win most of your fights?
I lost one.

Really?
I was hit in the head with a pool cue when I had a little band in Michigan. We were in some bar and some guy didn't like the band, and he hit me over the head with a pool cue. It broke and I stood there, and I turned around and said, "You just made a big mistake." He was shocked that I didn't go down, and he started going, "Oh, no, no, no, no. Forget it!"

Dallas in the Sixties was not friendly. We were stopped at a traffic light around midnight, and some guy in the car behind me got out and hit me in the head with a whiskey bottle. And I got out of the car.

A whiskey bottle didn't put you down?
No. I've had my head slammed in a locker, but the only time I ever got knocked out was in Golden Gloves. I was cocky. He hit me with an uppercut. There are two places you can hit someone and it's over. An uppercut to the jaw, you just go limp.

You must have a hard head then.
Well, I have had 18 concussions.

Let's talk about *Braver Than We Are,* the record you made with Jim Steinman in 2016.
One of the songs, "Who Needs the Young," was around when *Bat [Out of Hell]* was being done. We did it first in the normal Meat Loaf tone. People heard it and went, "Oh, he can't sing anymore." They're morons. Come on, guys.

Why do they fixate on that?
Everyone is a music expert. They don't realize I had to develop my tone. I had to learn how to sing like that. That is what Jim and I did for four years almost every day. We worked on the tone I used on *Bat Out of Hell*.

When you sing, you inhabit your characters.
Yeah. Every song is a different character. Every song I have a trigger to get to a different character.

You haven't done a concert since 2016. Are you done with touring?
I don't want to be. But I don't know. I have offers, but it's going to be tough. They want to put tickets on sale soon, but I don't know if I'll be ready. I'm between a rock and a hard place. I want to do more shows, but I've got to get into rehab [Meat Loaf was suffering physical ailments, including a bad back]. I've got to get my knee back so I'm not limping.

I will never be able to do what I used to because of my back. All that movement and running and stuff. It's not like a fake energy. It's not like, you know, bells and whistles and stuff. The people don't really understand the energy.

Do you do any meditation?
No. I can't meditate. I think too much. And I have a rule: I have to learn something new every day.

What did you learn today?
Nothin' yet.

What did you learn yesterday?
I was looking up something about electricity. I learned you can't find the electricity rate for Austin because it's different everywhere. All these communities have their own mud, water-powering electricity. So if you have your own mud, the taxes are higher. That's also why I want to move to Nashville – I moved here to get away from the California taxes. . . . I'm sorry. I'm not a conservative and I'm not a liberal. I've passed out flyers for McGovern, I voted for Carter, I refused to vote the first election,

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Reagan versus I can't remember who. Then I liked Reagan so I voted for him, then I voted for Clinton. I voted for Obama on the first term, but not the second.

Who did you vote for in the [2016] election?

I'm not going to tell ya.

You went through the whole list. You can't stop now.

I'm not gonna tell ya. . . . I voted for Trump. I'm not supposed to talk politics. . . . *USA Today* listed me as a Republican, and that drives me crazy. I'm not. I'm not a registered Republican at all.

Let's talk about your childhood. I know your father came at you with a knife once. Sounds like you cheated death there.

I cheated death long before that. He threw me through a plate-glass window.

Do you remember what the offense was?

Oh, nothing. He was an alcoholic. He was like Jack Lemmon in *Days of Wine and Roses*. He would disappear for days on end, and my mother would go out looking for him when I was young. I think that's how I learned how to act.

When I was 12 or 13 . . . back in the Sixties, in between Dallas and Fort Worth, there were the most brutal redneck rough bars. You can't imagine. You see them on film, but until you have been in one you have no idea. I would tell my mother to wait in the car, and I would go into these bars.

Tell me about being bullied as a kid.

That's how I learned how to fight. I remember fourth or fifth grade taking on about seven guys because I was so big, you know. It's like, "Fatty fatty two-by-four, can't get through the bathroom door, so he did it on the floor." I would hear all that kind of stuff, but boy did they want me to play football.

How big were you at 13?

About 230, 240. I would walk into these bars and I would develop this character, basically a serial killer. They would look at me, and I would look back at them like, "You touch me, you're dead." They would back away from me. I was that intense.

That's the energy you were projecting?

Yeah, and they would not even come close to me. I would walk up and down and walk out. And once in a while I would find [my father]. He would push me away, and I would grab him.

Were you bigger than him?

Hell no. He was six foot three and weighed 300 and something. And he had a brother that weighed 740 pounds. He got stuck in a trunk of a '57 Chevy and had to be cut out by the fire department. I don't know that side of the family.

So your father was a bad man?

Yeah. He was an alcoholic. When he sobered up, he wasn't. And he did get sober. My mother passed in '66 or '67, and that's why I dropped out of college. I stole my father's credit card and went to Love Field. I didn't know where the plane was going. Whatever the next flight was was the one I was getting on. And it was going to L.A.

I got to L.A., and I'm sitting at the luggage claim going, "What the hell am I doing?" So finally, a taxi pulled up and the driver goes, "Do you want to go somewhere?" And I go, "Yeah, take me to Sunset Strip." He goes, "Do you have any idea how long Sunset Boulevard is?" I go, "No, but I want to go to where Kookie was on *77 Sunset Strip,* the TV show." The driver goes, "That doesn't exist. I'm going. I will take you to Whisky a Go Go." I said, "Perfect."

I was wearing a blazer, and I had a guitar with me and a suitcase. I had long hair from football. They called me "hair guy." I was an alien. But I got a job as a bouncer at a teenager psychedelic club. They didn't serve alcohol; they served little hot dogs and Cokes. But it would be packed with these teenagers. The owner let me live in the back.

I eventually was cast in *Hair,* and I had to move to New York to do it on Broadway. New York City freaks me out. I break out in these blisters that are covering my body from nerves. So they ship me

Meat Loaf would often clash with an alcoholic father. "I cheated death," he said. "My dad threw me through a plate-glass window."

to Pittsburgh. That's much better. I continue with *Hair,* leave *Hair,* get an agent named Jeff Hunter. He says to me, "If you're going to work as an actor in New York, you're going to go to the Public Theater."

That's where you met Jim Steinman.

He was directing a play called *More Than You Deserve*. I came in to audition. I sang a Motown-style song called "(I'd Love to Be) As Heavy as Jesus." I didn't know Jim. He didn't know me. But when I was done, he walked by me and said, "By the way, you're as heavy as two Jesuses."

Then he said, "Can you wait here?" He came back with 16 people, including the casting director and Joe Papp, the head of the theater. They asked me to be a part of this showcase to preview the musical. They gave me $125 a week, enough to pay my rent and have groceries.

What were those early shows like?

When we started, we only played to about 100 people a night. When I sang Jim's song, everyone stood on their feet and went crazy. I was going, "Maybe I should work with this guy Steinman. People tell me I can sing, but I've never sang like that."

When the play finally opened, the audience went berserk every time I sang "More Than You Deserve." Paul Shaffer was the musical director. One night, they started to chant "More! More! More!" Paul looked at me and mouthed the word "chorus." I went out there and sang the chorus again. Mary Beth Hurt was in the play as well. She said to me, "We've never seen anything like that."

Around this time, I got a job in the *National Lampoon* road show understudying John Belushi. I got Jim a job as the piano player and said to him, "Listen, we're going out on the road. Let's sit together and write a pop song." We'd meet in the afternoons at the theaters because they always had a piano. "You Took the Words Right Out of My Mouth" came together then. My input was more arrangement, methods, a word or two here and there. My job was to make the songs focused, the same way you'd get a character focused. Every song was a character.

I never asked Jim – ever – what he wrote a song about. "Why'd you write this? What's it about?" I would never ask a writer of a script, "Why did you write this character? What is this character about?" Because it's none of his business after I get it.

Where did "Paradise by the Dashboard Light" come from?

Nobody knows this, but "Paradise by the Dashboard Light" was my song. It was about a girl named Renee Allen, who I went out with. We'd park somewhere and she'd, in so many words, say "Stop right there." And I had a 1963 red Galaxie convertible that I worked to buy. It had the "Dashboard of Doom." I told Jim this story sitting in front of his apartment.

Why did it take so long for *Bat* to come out?

We auditioned for people all over town, but they'd say to me, "We want to sign you to our label, but you gotta get rid of this guy." In the meantime, to augment the money, we were playing small supper clubs around New York for 60 people a night.

People kept saying, "Listen, this guy Steinman, you can't be with him. You're too good." I went, "You're in the music business and you're telling me that? This guy is an absolute genius. And me and him together, we're an unstoppable force."

Clive Davis was the worst. He said, "You don't know how to write a song." People just wanted to sign me. In the meantime, I did the lead vocals on Ted Nugent's record. They wanted me to go with Nugent and REO Speedwagon, all these people. I went, "Stop it! This is not happening! I'm not leaving Jim!" They go, "Then you'll never make a record."

What caused it to finally pop?

We signed with Cleveland International and made the album with Todd Rundgren producing. It took off because Walter Yetnikoff at CBS believed in it, and a program director in Buffalo, New York, named Sandy Beach put it on because in "Two Out of Three Ain't Bad" there's the line "You'll never find gold on a sandy beach." Also, John Belushi helped us get on *Saturday Night Live* in May 1978.

Saturday Night Live broke the egg, and *Bat Out of Hell* spilled out all over the world. We went from selling no records to being five-times platinum. From that point on, I was always at 11. I would get up, go do the morning radio, go to soundcheck, do interviews, do the show, sometimes go to a radio station after the show. I'd go to the *Rocky Horror Picture Show* screenings. [*Cont. on 80*]

A Raging Civil War.

1,200 Tons of Chemical Weapons.

Nine Months to Destroy Them.

How four women you've never heard of helped avert a global crisis and saved untold lives

By Tessa Stuart

Illustration by Joan Wong

CRIME AGAINST HUMANITY In 2013, Assad's forces unleashed sarin gas on their own people, killing more than 1,400. Clockwise from top: Bodies in Ghouta; a medic treats a victim; Sawwan, who tended to the injured.

A

MEENAH SAWWAN WAS up late on Aug. 21, 2013, scrolling through Facebook on her phone, when she saw the first report that a town not far from hers had been hit by a chemical attack. She watched footage from Eastern Ghouta, then saw another post that said that her hometown, Moadamiyat al-Sham, had been hit as well. She started tapping out a reply in the comments: "This is wrong. This is fake news. I'm in Moadamiyat and we were not hit by chemicals." Then she started hearing screams.

Sawwan and her family – 12 of them were living together at the time – ran outside, but shortly after they did, mortar shells began raining down. They didn't know where to go next. "It felt like the sky was falling," Sawwan says.

She made her way to a nearby field hospital – a glorified basement stocked with scavenged medical supplies – stopping along the way to run her hands over her body and make sure she hadn't been hit by shrapnel. When she got there, bodies were splayed on the asphalt outside as men with hoses sprayed them down.

Inside the hospital, she remembers, "there was barely a place to put a foot. It's dark, full of screams, and people being washed, and the smell of vinegar." The medical staff were shouting directives: " 'Take their clothes off, wash their bodies, try to do CPR.' " At one point, she was handed a 10-month-old baby, but she could not revive the infant. "Nobody knew what they were doing, but you have to do something."

Sarin – the colorless, odorless nerve agent dropped that night on civilians in the suburbs of Damascus – was developed in the 1930s by German chemists as a pesticide. Exposure will trigger watery eyes, pinpoint pupils, a tightness in the chest in seconds, then paralysis, respiratory failure, and death. In 2013, the Syrian government reportedly possessed several hundred tons of the stuff, plus hundreds more tons of mustard gas and VX, another nerve agent.

The Aug. 21 assaults that killed more than 1,400 Syrians were carried out one year, nearly to the day, after President Obama's casual declaration that Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad's use of chemical weapons was a "red line," one that would change his "calculus" on America's involvement in the country's civil war. It was a clear threat: If Assad gassed his own people, the U.S. would respond with force – and that threat was particularly loaded, given the fact that Syria is a client state of Russia's. To many observers, it seemed plausible that Obama's words – and Assad's blatant disregard for them – could drag the U.S., Russia, and both of their allies into a full-blown global conflict. But then something unexpected happened: Instead of dropping bombs on Syria, the United States cut a deal, through Russia, that would force Assad to give up his chemical-weapons stockpile. And then something even more unexpected happened: It actually worked.

The unlikely solution would ultimately involve the cooperation of 17 countries, the warp-speed work of a small cohort of U.S. Army chemists, and squabbling and infighting within the highest echelons of the U.S. government. It headed off U.S. military intervention in Syria and helped earn the Nobel Peace Prize for the intergovernmental organization under whose banner it was carried out. But before all that, the kernel of the idea – to destroy Assad's chemical arsenal on a boat in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea – and the duty of seeing it through began with a team of anonymous young women in a dismal office, burrowed deep inside an obscure federal agency.

"There certainly were a lot of other people – hundreds of people – that had to do this," says Gen. Jay Santee, the former deputy director of the Defense Threat Reduction Agency. "[But] it would not have happened without these women. At all. In any way shape or form."

THREE WEEKS AFTER the attack, Chelsea Goldstein showed up to work at a joyless cubicle farm in Northern Virginia at 4 a.m. Someone had brought in doughnuts. The building was mostly empty – budget sequestration was in effect, and Department of Defense employees, like the rest of the federal workforce, were furloughed at least one day a week.

Goldstein had joined DTRA fresh out of college three years earlier, and for the past six months she had been part of a ragtag team tasked with nothing more than a complex thought experiment: How might the military go about securing and destroying a massive stockpile of chemical weapons?

Now, she stood jaw agape, doughnut in hand, as she and her co-workers watched U.S. Sec-

Senior writer TESSA STUART *recently profiled the whistleblower Reality Winner.*

PREVIOUS SPREAD: PHOTOGRAPHS IN ILLUSTRATION BY CHIEF MASS COMMUNICATION SPECIALIST MIKEL BOOKWALTER/U.S. NAVY; GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO; GETTY IMAGES. 2. THIS SPREAD: FROM TOP, LEFT TO RIGHT: NURPHOTO/CORBIS/GETTY IMAGES; JAN-NIKLAS KNIEWEL; BASSAM KHABIEH/REUTERS/ALAMY

retary of State John Kerry and Sergey Lavrov, Russia's foreign minister, announce on TV that Syria had agreed to give up its cache of chemical weapons. The entire disarmament process was to be completed within nine months. "We had no idea that such an agreement might come to pass," Goldstein recalls. "But we were the only team in the government working on this problem, so . . . giddyap! This is really happening."

A front-page story in *The New York Times* underscored the enormity of the pact, reached during a hastily arranged diplomatic summit in Geneva. "This situation has no precedent," a chemical-weapons expert told the paper. "They are cramming . . . six years' worth of work into a period of several months, and they are undertaking this in an ongoing civil war."

The deteriorating security situation wasn't the only obstacle the team had been considering as they weighed possible options. Terrorist groups like the Al-Nusra Front and the Islamic State were taking root in corners of the country. And there was an additional complicating factor that, until now, Syria had denied possessing such weapons at all, so any information about the amount, condition, and location of Assad's arsenal was based on speculative reports.

From the very beginning, it had seemed like an impossible job, which might be why some of the government's experienced operators – men who had spent decades in and out of former Soviet republics, demilitarizing barrels of chemical and biological warfare agents – considered it a waste of their time. Instead, the core team that began working to put together a plan was composed of people who looked much like Goldstein: young women with virtually no background in chemical-weapons destruction.

In a Defense Department organization like DTRA, where men typically outnumber women roughly two to one, the gender composition of the team stood out – and earned it the nickname "Toast's Angels," for commanding officer Col. John Cinnamon. An Air Force pilot with the call sign Toast ("It's funny for an aviator because that's [what they call it] when you die," Cinnamon deadpans), he had recently been charged with cobbling together the Syria task force. He didn't set out to create "an all-women superteam," Cinnamon says. He was looking for highly competent volunteers, and found women raised their hands: "There was hesitation from some folks, because the notion was we were going to fail, and we were gonna fail colossally. In general, the people willing to take that risk and see where this went were all women. The guys were more failure-averse."

"THERE'S A GOOD-OLD-BOYS' CLUB THAT [SAID], 'THESE WOMEN CAME UP WITH THIS IDEA — HOW COULD IT WORK?'" MACAULAY SAYS.

THE PILOT Air Force Lt. Col. Jannell MacAulay (today and with her family) joined DTRA after being told, "This will be easy. You just had a baby. There's nothing going on there." Then she was tasked with solving an impossible problem.

Two of the women were civilians in their mid-twenties, the other two were military officers fresh off maternity leave, and only one of the four had anything remotely resembling relevant experience. What they did have, after months of grappling with the particulars, was a firm grasp of just how difficult it would be to execute the mission the secretary of state had just committed to, even more so under the aggressive time constraints to which he'd agreed.

FORT BELVOIR IN suburban Virginia looks more like a mid-Atlantic college than an Army base home to dozens of Department of Defense agencies and more daily workers than the Pentagon. The Defense Threat Reduction Agency has a relatively small footprint at the base – just 2,000 employees – but it maintains a sprawling portfolio: any and all business of or relating to countering weapons of mass destruction, chemical, biological, or nuclear.

DTRA has existed, in one form or another, since at least the Manhattan Project, evolving as the United States' defense priorities have shifted: From the dawn of the Cold War until the fall of the Berlin Wall, its various precursors were charged with researching and developing new uses for nuclear technology. When the collapse of the Soviet Union left unsecured nuclear material littered across 11 time zones, the focus shifted toward containment efforts.

For example, when an earthquake off the coast of Japan triggered a tsunami that flooded the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant, DTRA was the agency responsible for helping to coordinate the response, cleanup, and strategy. When Libyan rebels overthrew the government, emissaries from DTRA were the ones who showed up with suitcases full of cash to hire guards to protect the country's chemical stockpile. When a semitruck transporting any amount of chem-

RIGHT: COURTESY OF JANNELL MACAULAY

PHOTOGRAPH BY **Kim Raff**

icals is jackknifed, there's a good chance someone at DTRA is doing a plume analysis, figuring out if the elements on board will transform into a deadly cocktail or just harmless sludge.

Julia Limage didn't know any of this as she wound her way through a career fair inside a cavernous D.C. convention center in the summer of 2012. Limage, then in her mid-twenties, had already dropped off copies of her résumé at every environmental- and public-health-adjacent job she could find when she decided to stop by the table of an obscure federal agency she'd never heard of. A few hours later, she was ushered into a tent for an interview at the agency, conducted by a Marine pilot, a scientist, and a buttoned-up project manager. The men were vague about the role in question but they offered cryptically: "We've got some bio projects – a lot of it's classified. We think you might be a good fit."

"WE WERE LIKE, 'OH, MY GOD,'" LIMAGE SAYS. "WE ACTUALLY HAVE TO CREATE A CHEMICAL-WEAPONS-DESTRUCTION FACILITY ON A SHIP."

THE CIVILIANS Chelsea Goldstein (right) and Julia Limage (far right and inset) were both staffers at DTRA when the mission started. "We were the only team in government working on this problem, so giddyap!" Goldstein recalls.

As a kid, Limage knew that when she grew up she wanted to be "working to save the planet. It was the Nineties – that was very in." She was raised in Bethesda, Maryland; her mother was a lawyer for the State Department, and her father helped write portions of the Endangered Species Act before becoming a science adviser in the Clinton administration. She'd gone off to college, then completed a Ph.D. in biology at Yale before returning to D.C. for a fellowship that placed recent grads in government jobs. She ended up getting two offers from the fair, including one at the State Department, which she turned down in favor of the enigmatic gig at the agency she'd never heard of.

She showed up to work that summer at a DTRA office called "Innovative Technologies" that was responsible for finding and enlisting partners to try their hand at solving difficult military problems. Three months before the attack on Ghouta, a contractor who worked with Limage's office drafted an anonymous challenge that was posted on a website called Innocentive. In the ad, an unnamed "Seeker" asked for solutions for "the demilitarization, destruction, or neutralization of a hypothetical stockpile of chemical warfare agents." The stockpile was 1,500 metric tons, the size the U.S. government suspected Assad had in his possession. Anyone was welcome to submit a proposal, and the ad promised a $50,000 reward to the person able to demonstrate the kind of "orthogonal thinking that might help resolve and fill this important technology gap."

From Limage's position in the lowest, least-classified area of DTRA, she was aware that a team of military planners had been gaming out hypothetical responses to the Syria problem for months. "They were doing the exact same thing, but in much more detail, working with the chemists at Edgewood [Chemical Biological Center, the Army's research and development center] on what they called 'the smart book,' with all the technical options," Limage recalls.

The book included everything from conventional destruction – an incinerator or a hydrolysis machine – to "kinetic" options (bombs, essentially) and strategies to quickly render warfare agents unusable in the event of a more surgical military operation. Almost all these scenarios, though, involved either great risk or the possibility of mass casualties. "It was a logistic nightmare," former Air Force Lt. Col. Jannell MacAulay says.

For the past several months, MacAulay had spent every day adding ideas to the list of possibilities. MacAulay had been California Miss T.E.E.N. 1992 (her talent was juggling machetes) before she grew up to fly C-130 transport planes in and out of combat zones. She was 30 weeks pregnant with her second child and had just completed training to become a military strategist when she arrived at Fort Belvoir, promptly went into preterm labor and was put on bed rest for 10 weeks.

When she returned to work in the fall of 2012, MacAulay was presented with a few options. She could either take over weapons-of-mass-destruction planning or she could lead a new team the agency was putting together on the off chance that the United States might somehow become involved in efforts to destroy Syria's chemical-weapons stockpile.

Her superior, MacAulay recalls, sold the job to her like, "This will be easy. You just had a baby; you'll just do planning. There's nothing going on there." Typically a hard-charging figure, she had completed three assignments back to back, earned two master's degrees in two years, and, after a complicated labor, MacAulay was ready to lean out for a little bit.

The need to stand up a team at all had only been recently identified, when Santee, then-deputy director of DTRA, was summoned to a meeting of the Threat Reduction Advisory Council, a brain trust made up of former gov-

LEFT: COURTESY OF JULIA LIMAGE

PHOTOGRAPH BY **Farrah Skeiky**

ernment officials. The Syrian civil war came up as almost an afterthought toward the end of the meeting, according to Santee, after a long roundtable on the most-pressing threats around the world. The group was familiar with the dangers after handling the toxic remnants of Saddam Hussein's defunct chemical-weapons program, and it harbored concerns similar mistakes might be made again in Syria.

"People really don't understand," Santee says. "We did have to destroy chemical weapons in Iraq, and it was rather ad hoc." There are stories of Iraqi soldiers dumping chemicals and nerve agents into a pool as American troops advanced on their positions. The U.S. soldiers only realized something was wrong when, half a mile away from a bunker, according to Cinnamon, they all developed spontaneous nosebleeds. They were forced to return in hazmat suits and cement mixers to turn the toxic emulsion into an inert block supposedly still there to this day.

The more they discussed possible scenarios, the more Santee realized with a growing sense of dread that not only was there no plan in place, but also that if anyone was responsible for coming up with one, it was DTRA. When he tasked Cinnamon with putting together a team, MacAulay was one of the first recruits.

Already at the agency when MacAulay arrived was an Army major named Tina Schoenberger. Schoenberger was a nuclear medical science officer with the Louisiana National Guard (the person who would suit up to determine whether a mysterious white powder was or was not anthrax) before the Defense Intelligence Agency drafted her as part of the team that scoured Iraq looking for weapons of mass destruction. That's where she met her husband, a former Green Beret turned military-intelligence officer. (He says he had to get to know her when he saw Schoenberger – who'd grown up riding three-wheelers, playing hearts, and shooting beer cans on camping trips with her big Catholic, Cajun family – had better aim than half of the trained soldiers in their unit.)

Like MacAulay, Schoenberger was a new mom. She'd been getting ready to deploy to Iraq a second time, in 2011, when she learned that not only was she being transfered from the Guard to the Army, she was also pregnant. So instead of the Middle East, Schoenberger was dispatched to DTRA. "The joke was they sent pregnant women to have babies here because they didn't know what else to do with us," Schoenberger says.

Rounding out the core team was Goldstein. A former college debater like himself, Goldstein had what Cinnamon saw as an "intellectual fungibility" that would be useful for the task at hand. "She looks really young, so everyone kind of discounts her," he says. After the summit in Geneva, Goldstein tapped Julia Limage to join the team.

"THE JOKE WAS THEY SENT PREGNANT WOMEN HERE BECAUSE THEY DIDN'T KNOW WHAT ELSE TO DO WITH US," SCHOENBERGER SAYS.

THE SCIENCE OFFICER Maj. Tina Schoenberger (pictured) and MacAulay brainstormed in a lactation room. "We're pumping, and she's teaching me about chemical weapons because she's a chemical-weapons officer," MacAulay recalls.

From the start, the group sensed it wasn't being taken seriously within the organization. "The accusation I got from some of the guys was: You just got pretty women to work with you because that made your life more pleasant. Your entry requirement for being on your team was they had to be good-looking women," Cinnamon says. "It was something that they got teased about."

But there were other signs, too. For one thing, MacAulay says, they weren't given a dedicated office space to operate out of, which left them shuttling between Cinnamon's office, Santee's, and the cubicle farm. They did not have a seat at the table in DTRA's daily morning meetings, either. "We would stand in the back of the room," MacAulay remembers.

The nicknames didn't help. "I would get pissed when they would say 'Cinnamon and his harem' or whatever . . . I took that not as making a joke, but of being dismissive," MacAulay says. "I just think that there was a good-old-boys' club that [said], like, 'These women came up with this idea – how could it work?' "

For her part, Goldstein saw things differently. "I never felt that we didn't have opportunities because we were women," she says. It was just 'Who's willing to put in the time? Who can bring their expertise to bear?' "

"They really were not the people that you would have expected to have been part of this team," Santee says. "But in a lot of ways, the people who would have been . . . they didn't think this really had any chance of success. Part of what makes this group extraordinary is we really didn't know it *couldn't* be done."

THERE ARE TWO kinds of planning in the U.S. military: deliberate planning and crisis action. The latter is what you'd expect: "There's a crisis right now – how do we solve it?" Deliberate planning is coming up with a million what-if scenarios. The Syria mission started as deliberate planning, or as MacAulay put it, "bullshit-

RIGHT: COURTESY OF TINA SCHOENBERGER

PHOTOGRAPH BY **Octavio Jones**

ting, brainstorming, throw baloney on the table and see what sticks."

For MacAulay, the lack of pressure was, at first, a relief. In the DTRA lactation room, Schoenberger helped bring her up to speed. "We're pumping, and she's teaching me about different aspects of chemical weapons because she was actually a chemical-weapons officer." Quiet and private, the room became a space where they could brainstorm, free from the constant barrage of requests for information waiting at their desks, or the feeling "like we had to hide behind a facade of being an expert."

Anything, at that point, would be better than the ideas that had already been floated, like a dumpster-size incinerator, or the use of a high-yield explosive that would detonate inside the storage facility, or burning the chemicals in an open pit. (In order to control the plume of noxious gases a fire like that would inevitably create, the firm that pitched that idea suggested creating an "air curtain" of high-pressure flames around the burn pit. It assured officials this strategy had been used effectively before, but balked when asked, "Did you try it out in a situation where if you smell the smoke 20 feet away you would die instantly?")

The team was charged with investigating the viability of ideas like whether the weapons could be loaded onto a plane or a helicopter and flown to a country with an existing destruction facility. As pilots, MacAulay and Cinnamon dismissed the notion out of hand. Even if it weren't for the war, no aircraft commander would agree to carry chemical weapons, stored for who knows how long in containers of questionable integrity, on their plane.

But those early brainstorming sessions did, eventually, lead to a meeting at Edgewood Chemical Biological Center, where Tim Blades, the center's director of operations, had an idea for a self-contained machine that could render the component chemicals inert, leaving only relatively harmless byproducts behind. Edgewood's chemists, Joby Warrick writes in his book *Red Line,* had used the technology before "to destroy beer-keg-sized containers of leftover chemical weapons in Iraq." The proposed device was nicknamed "the Margarita Machine," Warwick writes, for its resemblance to the frozen-drink dispenser.

While the process of getting seed funding for such an endeavor would normally take years, in January 2013 the DTRA team wrote up an emergency request – "This was like, 'No shit – we need this tomorrow. We need the money now,' " MacAulay says – and Edgewood got to work on a prototype.

The best part about Blades' Field Deployable Hydrolysis System was that, unlike conventional chemical-weapons incinerators, it was portable. It could be sent anywhere in the world – a feature that became critical since none of the countries with conventional chemical-weapons facilities appeared open to accepting Syria's. (Cinnamon recalls a frustrating call with a representative from France, who denied the existence of a chemical-weapons facility, while on the other end of the line, the DTRA team was staring at a public website describing the facility and its capabilities.) At one point, officials at the Pentagon were particularly bullish on the prospects of persuading the nation of Albania to accept the weapons.

HIGH-SEA MISSION The team helped oversee the retrofitting of the *Cape Ray,* adding pumps, hoses, and 2,200-gallon titanium barrels to destroy tons of chemical weapons.

From the outset, the core team was skeptical that such a deal could be reached. "I just remember sitting in Gen. Santee's office on the couch after we had had a meeting with the Pentagon and thinking, 'We need more options. Because what if that fails, and that fails?' The Pentagon was putting a lot of their eggs in the Albania basket," MacAulay remembers. "Tina said something, like, 'What about on a ship?' " To three Air Force pilots, an Army major, and a civilian, the idea of destroying the weapons on the open sea may have started as a joke ("This was around the time Lonely Island's 'I'm on a Boat' song came out," Goldstein notes). But, at the same time, it didn't seem insane.

Then August came. The team found out that a suspected chemical attack had been carried out outside Damascus. In an instant, the theoretical work they'd been doing became very real. "As military members, we would never go to the civilian population first – that's the last line. . . . [Assad] went there first," Cinnamon says. "That really made the whole team angry."

IN GENEVA, as the team supporting Kerry was hammering out the details, it seemed like Russia had already lost interest in the endeavor. "We give them a piece of paper that says what we think the plan should be, and they just go, 'Yeah, that looks fine to us,' " Cinnamon, who'd flown to Europe to aid negotiations, recalls. "They didn't even look at it. They're like, 'I don't care. You guys are going to fail. Write whatever you want.' We kind of look at each other like, 'Well, if we can write whatever we want, then . . . let's just go for everything.' "

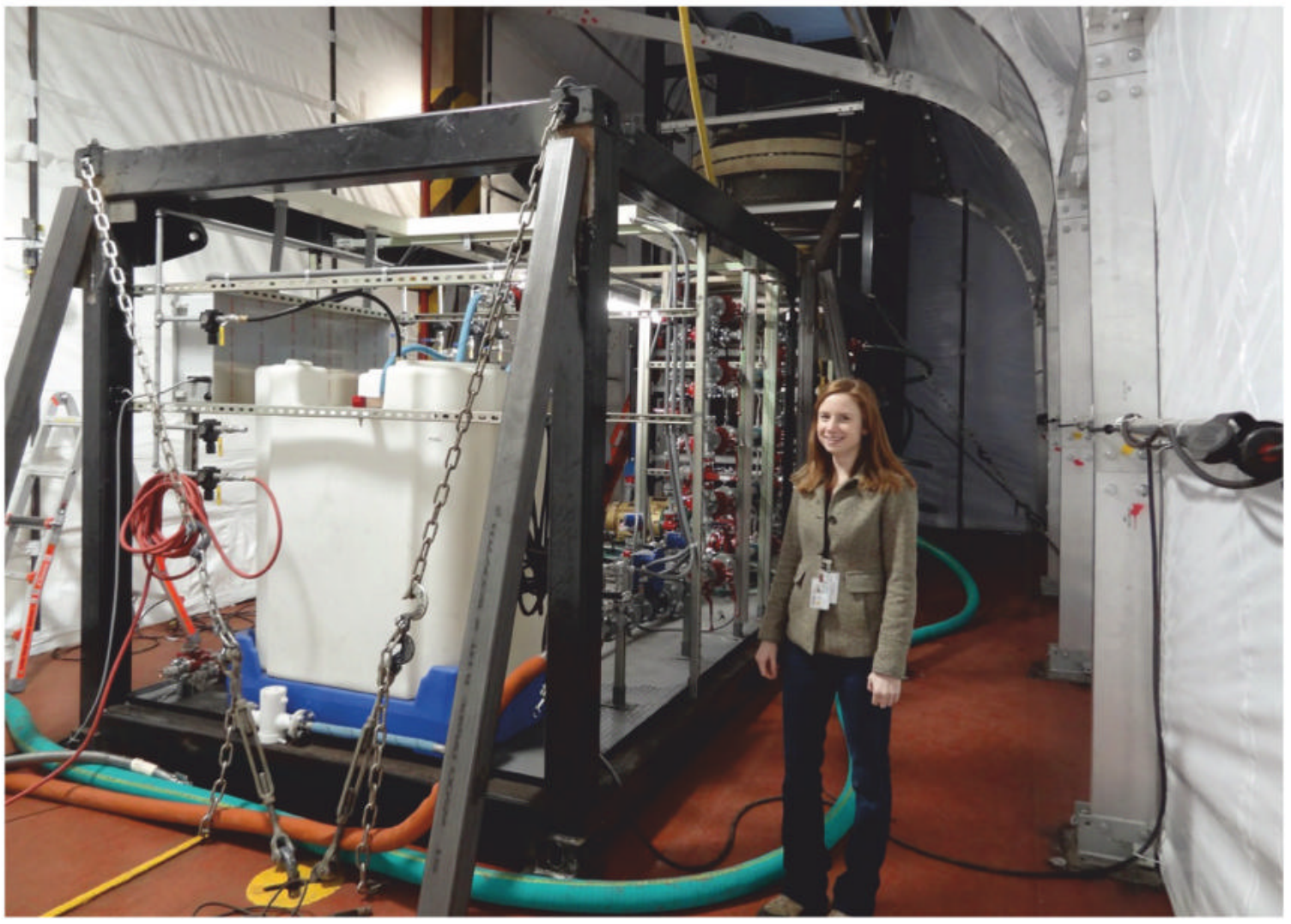
Back at DTRA headquarters, MacAulay, Schoenberger, and Goldstein were working 24-hour shifts. Cinnamon would blast out emails in the middle of the night: "Can we fly Predator drones in Syrian airspace?" Or "How many months would it take to produce the hydrolysis machine?" They would track the answers down and send them back as the diplomats hammered out a framework. Schoenberger fielded questions about the feasibility of the prospect they'd joked about: Rather than bringing the Edgewood chemists' machine into Syria or some third country, what if the demo was performed in international waters?

Privately, Schoenberger was unsure whether the idea would go anywhere. "If you ever do course-of-action development, you always have a throwaway COA that you know isn't really going to cut the mustard," she says.

There were a lot of reasons to dismiss the notion out of hand. A mission like this had never been attempted before. Beyond the practical challenges of outfitting a ship in time, there was, for starters, the potential for a terrorist attack or a devastating chemical spill – either contained to the vessel itself, or worse, affecting indeterminate swaths of the ocean.

But now that it was being seriously considered as a diplomatic option, it became Schoenberger and Limage's job to run down the particulars. Schoenberger headed to Portsmouth, Virginia, where she met a salt-licked, bushy-mustached man from the Maritime Administration who was surprisingly bullish on the throwaway COA's prospects.

MASS COMMUNICATION SPECIALIST SEAMAN DESMOND PARKS/U.S. NAVY



TAKING CHARGE Limage had to make sure the ship could undertake the dangerous mission ahead. "Some of the military guys were like, 'Who's this little girl?' They didn't know what to make of me," she says.

COURTESY OF JULIA LIMAGE

"He said, 'We can do this. We retrofit vessels in 60 days for Marines that are going out on missions. If you give us the specifications, we can do this.'" She can't remember the man's name, but Schoenberger says, "It was that conversation with that guy that convinced me."

In order to pull it off, any ship would need not only a helicopter landing pad, but also enough space to accommodate the chemicals themselves plus two hydrolysis machines, filtration systems, an onboard laboratory, containers for the toxic byproduct that would eventually be disposed of on land, and housing for 35 crew members; beyond that, a 63-person team operating the machines and a security detail.

Schoenberger and MacAulay started working on a sketch of a white paper. "Before we knew it, we had a fleshed-out ship option," MacAulay recalls. "But no one wanted to look at it."

Inside the Pentagon – where suddenly, there was a flurry of interest in being involved in the plan to destroy Syria's chemical weapons – consensus was building behind the idea of hauling the chemicals to Albania. "The ship option," meanwhile, was dismissed out of hand. Santee recalls one official calling the idea "harebrained" at a meeting at the White House and another high-level meeting in which he believes his presentation was deliberately sabotaged. ("I got up to give the brief, and there were supposed to be, like, 15 slides. And after three slides, the brief was over. There were no more slides. Somebody who didn't want me to brief the ship took them out," Santee says.) At one point, he received a direct order to stop pursuing the idea, a command Santee declined.

To Limage, it was Albania that didn't seem viable. One of her first jobs was to complete a comparison of the costs of destroying the weapons on a merchant vessel named the *MV Cape Ray* and incinerators in Albania. Among other reasons that the oceanic idea seemed more viable: no pushback from locals, fewer security concerns, and greater cost-effectiveness. "The ship seems crazier on its face, but we had much more control over it," Limage says.

After Santee was ordered to stand down, MacAulay and the others took it as a challenge: "We printed out quite a few copies of the ship option, and we were walking around the Pentagon just throwing it on people's desks," including that of the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, where her husband worked beside desk officers for the Middle East. The move seemed to pay off soon after, when negotiations with Albania fell apart. By that time, the white paper had caught the attention of a senior DOD official who helped revive the proposal.

Limage was sitting in her gray cubicle on the fall afternoon when Goldstein and Cinnamon returned from an interagency meeting. "We're going with the ship," Cinnamon said. There was a feeling of triumph – they'd spent months comparing the costs, benefits, risks of each option, and they had a detailed plan ready to implement – but there was also a real sense of angst. "We were like, 'Oh, my God. We actually have to do this now,'" Limage says. "'We have to create a chemical-weapons-destruction facility on a ship.' He looked kind of ill."

USUALLY, THE PEOPLE who plan and strategize in advance of a military mission and the operators who execute it are separate teams. But because this assignment cut across so many spheres of influence, because it had to be completed on such a tight timeline, and because, by the end of it, so many people from so many different federal agencies and intergovernmental organizations wanted to be involved, the core DTRA team ended up doing the work of both the planners and the operators. "We, as the planners, just kept a hold of it the whole time," MacAulay says.

Long before the weapons could be loaded onto the ship, they'd have to be inspected, repacked into new containers, ferried from locations scattered across the country through a war zone to the Syrian port at Latakia. On a practical level, that meant sourcing mercury-coated metal drums, forklifts, cranes, shipping containers, and armored jackets for the flatbed trucks. "We were doing that type of planning on so many things every day," Limage says. "Things that one group of people would never be kind of managing in such detail."

Before the chemicals could be extracted, they would have to be located and accounted for, an exercise that required the cooperation of both the Syrian government and the Russian intermediaries. In November, MacAulay was dispatched to the Hague to help coordinate what, per the Geneva agreement, would be an international joint mission executed under the banner of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) – a group that was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize that December – with support from the United Nations.

MacAulay's early days in the Netherlands were spent in a room with a Syrian chemical-weapons expert and a translator, compiling a listing of Assad's chemical weapons since the program's inception in 1970s, while a Syrian general paced silently in the background.

"We knew they had this stuff, but we didn't have all the particulars," MacAulay says. What quantities of sarin and other chemical precursors existed at which sites? What was the size and status of containers they were stored in? Could they be loaded onto trucks? What MacAulay remembers most about those conversations is that the Syrian expert seemed terrified of the general looming behind him. And he wouldn't look her in the eye.

In Syria, OPCW weapons inspectors fanned out to sites around the country, while in the Netherlands, U.S. diplomats worked to secure support for the mission from other countries. In the end, 17 nations contributed: Denmark and Norway sent ships to accept the weapons at the Syrian port. Italy offered a port where the weapons could be transferred from those ships to the U.S. merchant vessel outfitted with the hydrolysis machines. Chemical byproducts that couldn't be destroyed aboard the vessel would be disposed of by Germany, Finland, and the United Kingdom.

Back in the U.S., Limage and Goldstein began compiling a master spreadsheet with each and every item that would be needed and writing white papers about which environmental laws were to be considered. They met with veterans groups concerned about the potential for chemical exposure and had to prepare arguments for lawyers from the Maritime Administration who believed the mission [*Cont. on 81*]

Cuff

“Dark, lyrically strong and shockingly raw.”

— The Hype Magazine

cuttmusic.com

Reviews

Music

MAREN MORRIS FINDS A NEW ROAD

The eclectic Nashville star pushes against her own brand on her third album

By JONATHAN BERNSTEIN

Maren Morris
Humble Quest
COLUMBIA NASHVILLE
★★★½☆

WHEN MAREN Morris released her 2018 pop breakthrough, "The Middle," the song introduced one of her guiding philosophies with a simple question: "Why don't you just meet me in the middle?"

Ever since debuting with 2015's soulful singalong "My Church," Morris has carved out her space as Nashville's most thoughtful hitmaker, despite steering her career in seemingly unexpected directions: She's the only pop singer who could just as credibly appear with Zedd at a Vegas nightclub and perform at the Newport Folk Festival alongside the Highwomen, her singer-songwriter supergroup. All the while, Morris ➔

ILLUSTRATION BY
Sandra Dionisi

MAREN MORRIS

has found a reliable home as a country-music centrist; her last album, 2019's *Girl,* yielded two Number One hits on country radio.

Morris opens *Humble Quest,* her fascinating, and proudly unresolved, third record by questioning those accolades: "Couple hundred songs and the ones that finally worked/ Was the one about a car and the one about a church," she sings on "Circles Around This Town." It's a cutting dismissal of the system Morris is working within, and a declaration of a break with her past self. Does the rest of the LP live up to such a daring proclamation?

Yes and no. There are precisely zero churches or trucks on Morris' latest. Instead, the Texas singer luxuriates in tasteful adult pop rock in the vein of Sheryl Crow and John Mayer, collaborating with producer Greg Kurstin, an A-list practitioner of the sound (Adele, James Blunt, Foo Fighters).

Kurstin and Morris previously collaborated on the singer's 2019 crossover blockbuster "The Bones," which serves as a blueprint here. If there's a central thesis to *Humble Quest,* it's that for Morris, and her husband, fellow country singer Ryan Hurd, the bones are, indeed, very good. This is an album devoted to grown-up love and committed relationships, suited to soundtrack any number of future milestones, from first dances ("I Can't Love You Anymore") to funerals ("What Would This World Do") to friendiversaries ("Good Friends").

Humble Quest is at its best when it's poking holes in its own premise, whether on the searching title track, when Morris admits she hasn't found what she's looking for, or on "Detour," when she conjures the Chicks ("Might take the long way") and admits something devastating: "Not supposed to cry when all the skies are blue," she sings, in a photo negative of the confidence of "Circles Around This Town." "But I was disappointed when I saw the view."

Then there's "Hummingbird," an Appalachian-style folk ballad about her baby son. It's a stark moment of intimacy that fits a sentiment she offers at the beginning of the album: "Trying to say something with meaning, something worth singing about." *Humble Quest* works because she never pretends that it's easy. ®

HURRAY FOR THE RIFF RAFF RISE UP

Alynda Segarra has made a powerful album about finding a freedom in dark times By JON FREEMAN

Hurray for the Riff Raff

Life on Earth

Nonesuch

★★★★☆

HURRAY FOR the Riff Raff's 2017 album, *The Navigator,* was Alynda Segarra's project of reclamation, a means for the New Orleans songwriter to explore their Puerto Rican roots and expand beyond their group's scruffy country-folk origins. Segarra had recently traveled to Puerto Rico, and their experience witnessing people finding joy despite grueling social conditions came out in the album's themes of survival and resilience.

Segarra's new album, *Life on Earth,* feels less overtly political, but still has a fiery sense of urgency, maybe due to the fact that we're all presently living through exhausting, traumatic times. The new songs grapple with what it means to seek freedom when there's seemingly nowhere to go – "because it's not safe at home anymore," as Segarra sings on "Wolves." Despite the dystopian atmosphere, these songs brim with something like hope – not the naive kind, but a feeling sturdy enough to withstand whatever storms inevitably get tossed one's way.

Sometimes that means looking for messages in the sky, as on "Pointed at the Sun" and the reggaeton-influenced "Jupiter's Dance," or, as with "Pierced Arrows," it can mean trying to keep memories of a bad breakup at bay.

Life on Earth continues to push Hurray for the Riff Raff in interesting new musical directions. "Pierced Arrows" employs a tense post-punk groove that's underpinned by a buzzing synth bass line, while "Pointed at the Sun" is a big, jangling indie-rock number. There are more electronic elements as well: "Wolves" matches lush synth pads to a programmed beat and burbling noise, and "Precious Cargo" features Segarra rapping about an immigrant's harrowing border-crossing experience over a funky drum loop.

The beatless "Rosemary's Tears" has an R&B sensuousness to it, glistening with watery keys, warm gusts of brass, and Segarra's aching, expressive voice. They use that instrument to similar effect on the title track, a resolute piano ballad assisted by muted horns that patiently lays out the overlapping beauty and agony of existence.

Segarra's search for freedom also includes loosening the grip of trauma. Inspired by Dr. Christine Blasey Ford's accusations about Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh, "Saga" calls to mind the sound of Wilco's "Kamera" as it documents sexual assault. "I just want to be free, get over it in time/Push it out of my mind," Segarra sings. With this vital, empathetic album, Hurray for the Riff Raff offer a reminder that we can still plot a course out of the darkness and write a different story. ®

FROM TOP: AKASHA RABUT; FURMAAN AHMED

Raveena

BREAKING

Raveena's Border-Breaking Pop Sunshine

RAVEENA AURORA is a singer-songwriter who exalts in the spaces between R&B, folk, and pop. Her bright-hued 2019 album, *Lucid,* got her on some best-of lists, and now she's upping her game with her major-label debut, *Asha's Awakening*. Raveena, who grew up in Connecticut and Queens, New York, draws on her Indian roots, mixing Bollywood influences into songs like the dreamy "Asha's Kiss," featuring iconic artist Asha Puthli, and the radiantly pretty single "Rush," which cleverly riffs on notions of exotic desire over a transporting hand-clap groove. It's the sound of self-discovery drawn from many sources. **JON DOLAN**

★★★★★ Classic | ★★★★ Excellent | ★★★ Good | ★★ Fair | ★ Poor RATINGS ARE SUPERVISED BY THE EDITORS OF ROLLING STONE.

Quick Hits

Ten new albums you need to know about now

Eddie Vedder
Earthling
Republic

ED SHREDS The Pearl Jam singer teams up with producer-guitarist Andrew Watt (Ozzy, Post Malone) for a killer straight-ahead rock LP, with guest appearances by Elton John, Stevie Wonder, and Ringo Starr.

★★★★☆

Nilüfer Yanya
Painless
ATO

NIL THRILLS The second album from this U.K. singer-songwriter is a beguiling good time, slipping between genres and moods with speedy ease, like an entire season rushing by in a lovely blur.

★★★★☆

Dashboard Confessional
All the Truth That I Can Tell
Hidden Note

MIDDLE-AGE EMO Chris Carrabba delivers the classic Dashboard sound (mostly acoustic, deadly earnest), updating for his (and your) forties, with songs about how kids are great and life is hard.

★★★½☆

Shamir
Heterosexuality
AntiFragile

GENDER BENDER With titles like "Cisgender" and "Gay Agenda," the adventurous indie artist taps Nineties rock, pop punk, and industrial elements to create an inventive commentary on queer identity.

★★★½☆

Robert Glasper
Black Radio III
Loma Vista

MASTER BLASTER Veteran jazz pianist Glasper incorporates soulful hip-hop into a smooth contemporary-jazz context, with assists from rap and R&B innovators like Killer Mike and BJ the Chicago Kid.

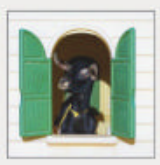
★★★½☆

Band of Horses
Things Are Great
BMG

GIDDYAP! This Seattle band's rustic rock can sometimes seem too mellow, but they sound refreshed on their first new album in six years, leaning into their power-pop Crazy Horse side on songs like "Lights."

★★★½☆

Superchunk
Wild Loneliness
Merge



STILL SUPER The beloved indie rockers try out some new things here, like jangly restraint and even horns (on "Highly Suspect"), and the result is an engrossing album full of stock-taking warmth.

★★★½☆

Kaina
It Was a Home
City Slang

SWEET HOME This Latin American singer and songwriter, who hails from Chicago, delivers an LP that's at once dreamy and soulful as she sings about the search for authenticity, community, and love.

★★★½☆

Amber Mark
Three Dimensions Deep
Interscope

SPACE CASE The New York R&B artist moves easily between funk, pop, and R&B on her full-length debut, but gets a little tangled in her lyrics' cosmic themes, making for a needlessly bumpy astral journey.

★★★☆☆

Spiritualized
Everything Was Beautiful
Fat Possum

KINDRED SPIRITS Most of Spiritualized's ninth LP comes off intricate, elastic, and soulful — just how the group has always intended to sound. Even their deepest trips have a down-to-earth feel.

★★★☆☆

CONTRIBUTORS: JON DOLAN, JOE GROSS, KORY GROW, STEPHEN KEARSE, JULYSSA LOPEZ, MOSI REEVES

CHILLING OUT WITH SONIC YOUTH

A new archival collection shows the New York noise heroes at their best

BY THEIR THIRD and last decade, New York noise heroes Sonic Youth opted for their version of chilling out. That same feeling comes across in this archival collection of mostly instrumental jams from throughout the 10 years before Thurston Moore and Kim Gordon's marriage fell apart, taking the band with it. What could be a random

Sonic Youth
In/Out/In
★★★★☆

set of toss-offs feels like a fully realized album. As if taking their cue from the years when they tried to fit in with the Lollapalooza crowd, the band rarely descends into formless feedback. They stay locked into the grooves, so that the sprawling brute force of "Out and In" recalls the *Daydream Nation* era, "Machine" feels like a *Dirty* outtake, and "Basement Contender" captures the brittle beauty of their latter-period work – the way a casual strummy jam could still build into a whirlwind. Even as guitars and rock itself were starting to take a cultural back seat, Sonic Youth could make the unhurried sound thrilling.

DAVID BROWNE

Gordon

FROM TOP, LEFT TO RIGHT: SCOTT DUDELSON/GETTY IMAGES; SCOTT LEGATO/WIREIMAGE; JOHNNY NUNEZ/WIREIMAGE; RICK KERN/GETTY IMAGES; NBC; JEAN BAPTISTE LACROIX/WIREIMAGE

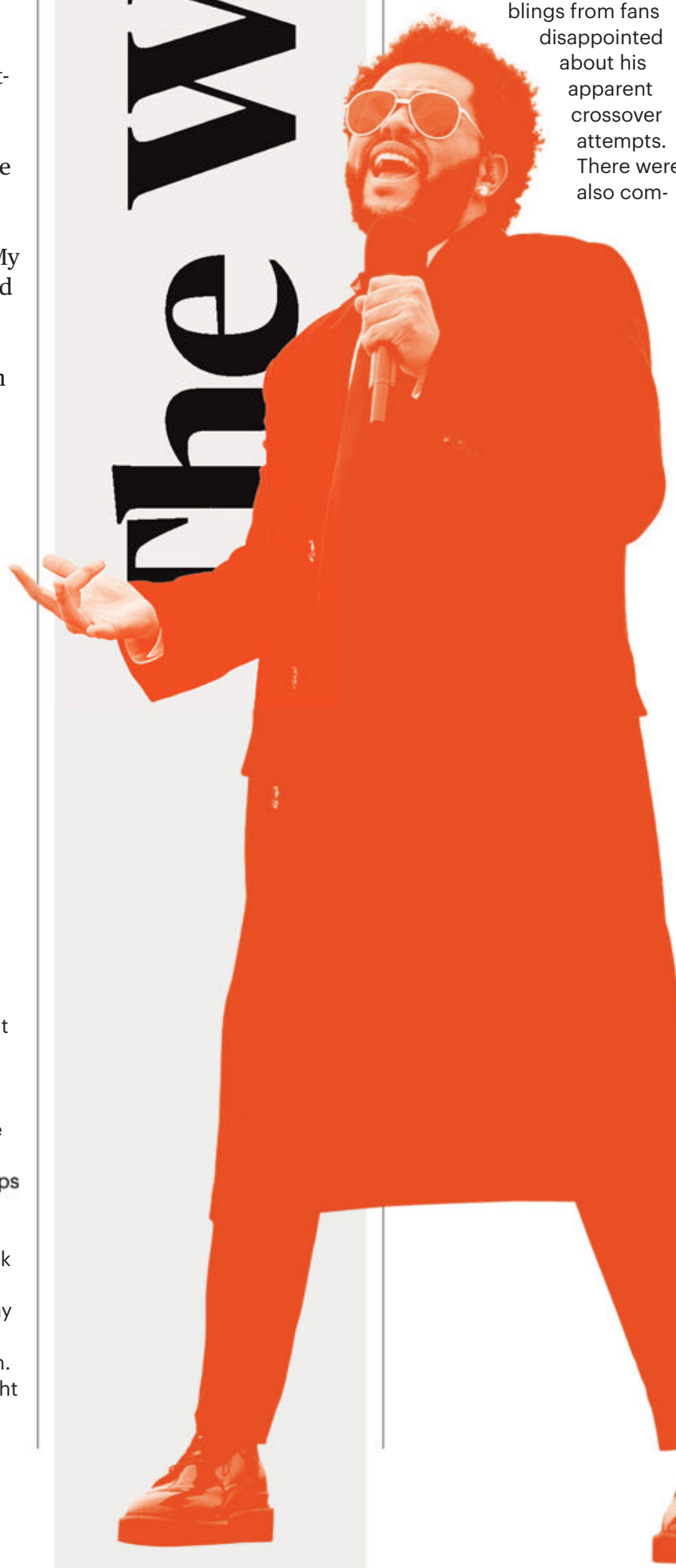
RollingStone GUIDE

The Weeknd

The moody, silken-voiced lothario who charted a bleary, beautiful course from Toronto avant-R&B artist to pop superstar

By WILL DUKES

ABEL TESFAYE came out of Toronto's post-Drake music scene working a lush, sepulchral sound and sampling Siouxsie and the Banshees. Soon, he was lacing hits like the cocaine-glazed "Can't Feel My Face" and the synth-smeared "Blinding Lights." Over the years, he's helped make the Top 40 a darker – and much more interesting – place.



Must-Haves

Trilogy
2012

After the release of this stellar compilation, comprising the Weeknd's first three mixtapes, it was impossible to conceive of R&B without some gloomy alt sensibilities thrown in. Everything was darker and way more eclectic in the Weeknd's world. "The Party & the After Party" flips a wicked Beach House sample whose tense Dionysian energy makes it feel like the soundtrack to a scary-hours cocaine orgy. "The Birds, Pt. 2" turns a dreamy Martina Topley-Bird riff into a low-key ode to sadomasochism. All told, *Trilogy* blissfully brought out the thorns in modern R&B's bed of roses.

Further Listening

Starboy
2016

Though it's one of his highest-charting albums, *Starboy* is in some ways the dark horse of the Weeknd's catalog. When it dropped, there were grumblings from fans disappointed about his apparent crossover attempts. There were also complaints that it was too long. At 18 tracks, *Starboy* does feel a bit bloated. But it contains gems like the Kendrick Lamar-assisted "Sidewalks," which boasts some of the Weeknd's most poignant lyrics. "Reminder" is a sleeper, on which his world-weary bluster — offset by forlorn piano — makes him come off like a human version of the cheery dog-in-a-fire meme. Indeed, everything was fine.

After Hours
2020

After Hours is the Weeknd locked in with a formula that's as comfort-inducing as his TGIF-friendly nom de plume. But there's nothing run of the mill about his fourth album. From the bloody grin on its cover to the Super Bowl-halftime-dominating snarl of the mammoth "Blinding Lights," this nocturnal opus is all about thrills. "In Your Eyes" puts the pandemic behind a velvet rope. But there's also quiet moments like "Escape From LA" — an epic cuffin-season staple for the apocalypse. Here, the Weeknd proved that being a bold name was not going to slow down his momentum.

Dawn FM
2022

Dawn FM is the perfect marriage of the Weeknd's edgy auteurism and pop-star predilections. The edge is there — as on the blood-on-the-dance-floor anthem "Don't Break My Heart" — and the Top 40 sunniness on lead single "Take My Breath" feels just as genuine. Like a mumblecore flick that manages to somehow dominate the multiplexes, Tesfaye's fifth studio album turns a trippy ride to purgatory into an indelible megahit. He's never sounded more vulnerable than on the soon-to-be prom staple "Less Than Zero," and the caffeinated bop of "Gasoline," with its references to "staring into the abyss," make this one delightful *danse macabre*.

Going Deeper

Kiss Land
2013

Kiss Land, the Weeknd's official debut, made the best of a ready-for-prime-time iconoclast's predicament. Inevitably, some listeners would see a glossy major-label album by a singer who prided himself on innovating from the shadows as a betrayal. But "Wanderlust," with its four-on-the-floor pulse and haunting melody, was a harbinger of stickier megastar moments to come. "Live For," which featured then-XO label associate Drake, is a best-of-all-possible-worlds bonanza of endless hangovers and promiscuity over hypnotic strings. The Weeknd would have a more assured vision to offer in the future. But these 10 songs hold up as an able introduction.

Beauty Behind the Madness
2015

Beauty Behind the Madness found the Weeknd at a crossroads. He'd made his bones as a bleak belter, so by his second album, there were commercial expectations to be met. He conquered the mainstream, giving us "The Hills" and the ubiquitous "Earned It," which registers like some brooding valentine. "Tell Your Friends" is an essential deep cut — Kanye West's cinematic soul sample gives

RICH FURY/GETTY IMAGES

some depth to the Weekend's debauchery. Meanwhile, "Can't Feel My Face" channeled peak Michael Jackson for a sweeping paean to the addictive properties of a head-over-heels affair. These were highs we didn't want to recover from.

My Dear Melancholy
2018

Far from a between-blockbusters throwaway, 2018's *My Dear Melancholy* quietly slipped in after the massive success of 2016's *Starboy* with some memorably chill vibes. If this is the Weeknd's take on dejection, he makes it sound as serene as a calm morning jog. "Try Me" finds him offering up his heart to a would-be lover over soothing synths. And "I Was Never There" is a sedative bop about the voids of mindless sex that, nonetheless, achieves a striking sense of lucidity. Clocking in at a mere seven tracks, the EP is an invigorating quickie that's here for the long haul.

More Gems
Other peak moments from the Weeknd's catalog

"CREW LOVE"
Drake (feat. the Weeknd), 2011
A warm-as-analog ode to all the electric ladies, with a joyful hook (and a co-sign from one Aubrey Graham) that made it a proper introduction to the murky crooner with the Basquiat mane.

"GIFTED"
French Montana (feat. the Weeknd), 2013
The Weeknd's delicate refrains add some louche elegance to French Montana's slurry Bronxese on this intoxicating single about staying "faded all the time."

"OR NAH"
Ty Dolla $ign (feat. the Weeknd and Wiz Khalifa), 2014
Brazen raunch is on display on this streets-approved remix where the Weeknd taps into his inner chauvinist ("I'm not the type to call you back tomorrow") while promising to make inventive use of a kitchen tabletop.

FURTHER VIEWING

***The Show*, 2021**
The Show, which aired on Showtime last September, is a fascinating glimpse into the Weeknd's 2021 Super Bowl halftime performance. We don't get much face time with the man himself. But the camaraderie and creative kinship showcased among the Weeknd and the show's choreographers and producers is touchingly revealing.

"LOVE ME HARDER"
Ariana Grande (feat. the Weeknd), 2014
The Weeknd's sleek tenor glides over explosive chords on this upbeat ballad, where he supplies a winning sense of disquietude, crooning "Take this pleasure and take it with the pain."

"PULLIN' UP"
Meek Mill (feat. the Weeknd), 2015
On this scorching Meek Mill slow burner, the Weeknd makes the prospect of infidelity ("Tell your man wait inside when I'm pullin' up") feel like an instantly hummable flex.

"FML"
Kanye West (feat. the Weeknd), 2016
"FML" found West yearning for a state of grace, and, fittingly, the Weeknd sounded angelic here, even as he chided himself, lamenting "And even though I always fuck my life up/Only I can mention me."

"6 INCH"
Beyoncé (feat. the Weeknd), 2016
There's a smoky sheen to the Weeknd's placid lilt on this hazy, Isaac Hayes-sampling single where his verse about a bossed-up desperado ("She's stacking money, money everywhere she goes") reads as a trenchant tribute to female empowerment.

"COMIN' OUT STRONG"
Future (feat. the Weeknd), 2017
Future lets Tesfaye open this self-affirming song with some reflective lyrics ("'Member runnin' through the city in the same shoes/Now I'm gunnin' in the Benz and the Range too") that suggest that he started from the bottom, and is grateful to be here.

"PRAY FOR ME"
The Weeknd (feat. Kendrick Lamar), 2018
The Weeknd perfectly complements Lamar with a massive hook on this highlight from *The Black Panther* soundtrack that makes you want to teleport to Wakanda for one continuous celebration.

"LOST IN THE FIRE"
Gesaffelstein (feat. the Weeknd), 2019
French composer Gesaffelstein lets the Weeknd helm his imminently danceable hit with some tortured lines ("I'm tired of being home alone") that make longing sound lively.

Check out Rolling Stone .com for a definitive Weeknd playlist.

At Lollapalooza in 2018

FROM TOP: KEVIN MAZUR/GETTY IMAGES; TIM MOSENFELDER/GETTY IMAGES

ESSAY

The Riotous, Righteous 'Atlanta' Returns

Donald Glover's singular series is back after a four-year hiatus – and boy have we missed it

By ALAN SEPINWALL

ON MARCH 29, 2018, FX premiered an episode of *Atlanta* called "Barbershop," in which rising rap star Alfred "Paper Boi" Miles (Brian Tyree Henry) goes through a series of ridiculous ordeals on behalf of his talkative con man of a barber. Seven nights later, *Atlanta* gave us "Teddy Perkins," a chilling haunted-house story in which Paper Boi's weed-dealing sidekick Darius (LaKeith Stanfield) meets the title character, a ghoul who functions as a fictional stand-in for Michael Jackson, Marvin Gaye, and other Black musical stars whose great art was inspired by their even greater pain.

"Teddy Perkins" – with *Atlanta* creator-star Donald Glover unrecognizable under facial prosthetics and whiteface makeup as Teddy – was almost instantly anointed as one of the best episodes ever produced for television. And it is that: a mesmerizing, 35-minute descent into madness, racial self-loathing, repurposed childhood trauma, and bizarre humor. It's the one-two punch of "Barbershop" and "Teddy Perkins," though, that cemented *Atlanta*'s reputation as a show for the ages. There had been plenty of dramas capable of great hilarity, and comedies adept at eliciting tears. And the years leading up to *Atlanta*'s 2016 debut had given us auteur-ish series, like *Louis* and *Master of None,* that changed so much from episode to episode, despite featuring the same characters, that they felt like anthologies. But it was the extremes in genre, and the unmistakably high quality, that set this particular double-act – and *Atlanta* itself – apart from its peers. For a show to present, in consecutive weeks, as silly and hilarious an episode as "Barbershop" and then follow it up with one as thoughtful and tragic as "Teddy Perkins" would be like watching LeBron James hoist an NBA championship trophy and then a Nobel Prize for chemistry a few days later.

Between Glover's busy film and music schedule and the global pandemic, it will have been nearly four years without *Atlanta* by the time the third season premieres on March 24. In an era with 500-plus scripted TV shows a year, a series last glimpsed in 2018 may as well have aired in black-and-white on the DuMont Network. But Glover (who plays Al's cousin Earn), Henry, Stanfield, and Zazie Beetz (who plays Earn's ex and co-parent Van) have all been prominent in movies in between, while *Atlanta* itself has lingered in the memory as something more recent and vital than other shows of its vintage.

At a press conference before the first season premiered, Glover was asked about the series' frequently shifting tone. "The thesis with the show was to show people how it felt to be Black," he said, "and you can't really write that down. You have to feel it. So the tonal aspect was really important to me."

The challenges of being Black in America have become more publicly discussed during *Atlanta*'s long absence, with unabashed white nationalism returning to the spotlight, and a series of filmed police killings of Black men and women. But that notion has always been

BACK IN ACTION From left: Stanfield, Glover, Henry, and Beetz reunite. Glover says the series is about showing "how it [feels] to be Black. You can't write that. You have to feel it."

IMAGES USED IN ILLUSTRATION: GUY D'ALEMA/FX, 2; CURTIS BAKER/FX, 2; GETTY IMAGES (BOOMBOX); JEAN LOUIS PREVOST/FINE ART PHOTOGRAPHIC/GETTY IMAGES (FLOWERS); THATREE THITIVONGVAROON/GETTY IMAGES (MIXING BOARD); MERETHE SVARSTAD EEG/EYEEM/GETTY IMAGES (SIGN); PARKPOOM DOUNGKAEW/EYEEM/GETTY IMAGES; DAN REYNOLDS PHOTOGRAPHY/GETTY IMAGES (ATLANTA CITYSCAPE)

ILLUSTRATION BY **Natasha Cunningham**

palpable throughout *Atlanta,* which showed Earn, Al, and Darius witnessing cops shooting a Black man in its first-season finale. Sometimes, the theme demonstrates itself through implicit racism, like when Earn's attempts to spend a hundred-dollar bill at an upscale movie theater are met with suspicion by a white cashier. Sometimes, it's about the blurry borders between white and Black culture, like how the biracial Van feels caught between the two halves of her heritage, or when Earn has to listen to a white man quote Malcolm X to him at a Juneteenth party. Sometimes, it's about the exponential challenges of being both Black and poor, with Earn having to live in a storage locker between seasons. Other times, it's about very culturally specific ideas like the lengths a Black man like Al will go to in order to get the right haircut. And often, it's many things at once, like Al telling a fan, "I scare people at ATMs! I have to rap!"

But while Paper Boi's options are limited, *Atlanta* is a show overflowing with possibilities. Hiro Murai and the series' other directors (including Glover) present the whole thing under a slightly dreamlike haze, allowing stories to feel like they could go anywhere, even if the action is largely confined to a small geographic area. The show can do verité filmmaking, like a flashback showing cousins Earn and Alfred as late-Nineties teens. And it can just as easily incorporate bizarre flourishes, like Paper Boi appearing at a charity event with Justin Bieber, who is played by a Black actor, or a running joke about an invisible car having a very literal payoff. It can even be real and surreal at once, like Earn and Van's relationship crumbling in raw fashion while they're attending an inscrutable German holiday festival and Van is being stalked by a monster.

Atlanta gets to have things both ways a lot of the time. Examined up close, each episode appears to have little to do with the next. From a distance, though, Glover and Co. are telling bigger stories. "Barbershop," for instance, is one vignette among many in Season Two about Paper Boi coming to grips with the downside of celebrity – and with the limitations of having his inexperienced cousin act as his manager. The show can be scathingly funny in one moment (both Henry's exasperated scowl and Stanfield's relaxed line delivery are inexhaustible comic weapons), whimsical or sad in others. But there's a depth of feeling to it that's incredibly rare, even in this age of abundant TV artistry. At its best, *Atlanta* is less a show to be watched than an experience to fall into, be shaken by, and then set free from until the next time.

We can only hope all this time away hasn't dulled *Atlanta*'s edges. When last we saw Al and Earn, they were boarding a flight for the European tour that will be the subject of this third season, with Al explaining, "You my family, Earn. Yeah, you…you the only one that knows what I'm about. You give a fuck. I need that."

Our reunion with this family has been long delayed, but thank goodness it's here. We give a fuck. And we need it. RS

FROM TOP: BETH DUBBER/HULU; KATRINA MARCINOWSKI/HBO MAX

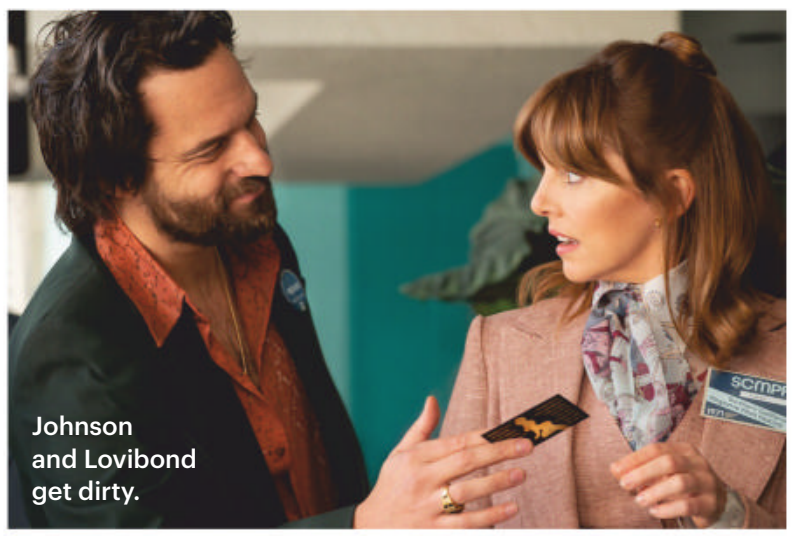
FLESH AND BONERS

Minx
NETWORK: HBO Max
AIR DATE: March 17
STARRING: Ophelia Lovibond, Jake Johnson, Jessica Lowe
★★★½☆

IN THIS EARLY-Seventies comedy, outspoken reporter Joyce (Ophelia Lovibond) can find only one backer for her feminist-magazine concept. And to her dismay, it's Doug (Jake Johnson), a cheerful, unapologetic porn publisher. "You gotta hide the medicine," he insists. "It's like when you give a pill to a dog, you dip it in peanut butter first. So my question is: What's our peanut butter?"

The peanut butter, it turns out, is dongs. Lots of them. Doug's brainstorm is to pair Joyce's articles on the ERA and birth control with explicit male centerfolds.

Minx does not lack for full-frontal male nudity, as if creator Ellen Rapoport were trying to make this one show into a corrective for decades of cable and streaming dramas using naked women as background scenery. And Rapoport, like Doug, is adept at administering the medicine. The series offers genuine insight into the subjects Joyce cares about,


Johnson and Lovibond get dirty.

but wrapped around them is an exceedingly charming workplace comedy.

Lovibond makes for an amusingly flustered heroine, as Joyce's idealism keeps colliding headfirst with the pragmatic nature of the publishing world. Few actors, meanwhile, can play a gum-chewing sleazeball with a heart of gold as well as *New Girl* alum Johnson. The rest of the ensemble builds nicely around them, including Lennon Parham, as Joyce's sister, who finds helping at the magazine a welcome diversion from suburban motherhood; Jessica Lowe, as a nude model from Doug's other magazines who has her consciousness raised by Joyce; and Taylor Zakhar Perez, as *Minx*'s sweet but utterly dim first centerfold.

There actually was a feminist skin mag around this time, *Viva,* published by *Penthouse* founder Bob Guccione and featuring a young Anna Wintour as fashion editor. *Playgirl* launched in this era, too. It's fertile storytelling ground, and *Minx* knows how to satisfy its audience. **A.S.**

Andrews and Seyfried

FALSE IDOL

The Dropout
NETWORK: Hulu
AIR DATE: March 3
STARRING: Amanda Seyfried, Naveen Andrews, Stephen Fry
★★★★☆

"I BELIEVED IN her," chemist Ian Gibbons (Stephen Fry) says of tech mogul Elizabeth Holmes (Amanda Seyfried) midway through the Hulu docudrama *The Dropout.* "I looked in her eyes and I thought…I thought I could see the future."

Ian is far from the only person to believe this of Holmes, whose company, Theranos, promised to revolutionize health care with a device that would run multiple tests from a single drop of blood. The cult of personality around the black-clad Holmes helped attract heavyweights like former Secretary of State George Shultz (Sam Waterston) to the company's board, and *The Dropout* digitally inserts Seyfried into clips of the real Holmes being lauded by Bill Clinton and Joe Biden.

But Holmes was a fraud who could never get her miracle machine to work – yet for years managed to keep this fact hidden from board members, investors, and eventually from the very real people who were relying on Theranos' creation to inform their own medical decisions.

There's little that's new in *The Dropout,* especially if you listened to the podcast of the same name that inspired it. But the miniseries, adapted by *New Girl* creator Elizabeth Meriwether, is nonetheless a slickly entertaining account of tech-world confidence run amok. Seyfried gets the voice right – both the deep register that Holmes adopted to seem more commanding as well as her halting cadence – but more important, captures the emotional complexity of a woman who for a long time convinced herself that she wasn't a con artist. *Lost* alum Naveen Andrews is chilling as Holmes' boyfriend and business partner, Sunny Balwani, and director Michael Showalter hurls an army of familiar character actors at Seyfried to help capture just how easy it was for everyone to fall under Holmes' spell.

It's a maddening, gripping, and at times startlingly funny re-creation of a story that almost feels too absurd to be true. **A.S.**

CLOSE-UP

Why We Need Another Batman

The Caped Crusader wrote the book on damaged superheroes – which is why he makes sense now more than ever

By DAVID FEAR

IT STARTED with the logo. They didn't even put the movie's name on the teaser poster, because everyone already recognized the symbol for a decades-old comic-book character. But this oval with a bat silhouette was . . . different. It gave the impression of being ominous, somber, darker. This wasn't your father's Batman. And he wasn't your Saturday-morning Super Friend, either.

Then, the trailer for Tim Burton's 1989 *Batman* showed up, featuring an intimidating Michael Keaton in a black-on-black batsuit – Mr. Mom broke bad! – and everything changed. Gone was the guy in a gray unitard who went *bam, pow, zap!* This was a loner who brooded, pouted, and psychologically snapped. Exit the Caped Crusader. Enter the Dark Knight.

Long before the MCU was a glimmer in Kevin Feige's eye, *Batman* changed superhero movies – everything that's come since has either been a variation on its tortured superhero wrestling with supervillains and personal demons, or a reaction to it. And with the release of Matt Reeves' *The Batman* on March 5, the latest screen incarnation of the DC character doubles down on the darkness. Looking like he's taking a break from fronting a My Chemical Romance cover band, a smudge-eyed Robert Pattinson gives us another Bruce Wayne in another Gotham City gone to seed, fighting another batch of familiar but slightly revised bad guys. The song remains the same – it's just more dirge-like than ever.

To paraphrase an agent of chaos: Why still so serious? Because that's the Batman that's embedded in the public imagination, a 180-degree turn from the idea of a Batusi-dancing, boob-tube do-gooder of the Sixties. The original Batman was more Chandleresque gumshoe than Adam West's "Careful, old chum" father figure. The producers of the TV show wanted something that resembled a series of pop-art panels come to life, however, which is how we got what writer Glen Weldon dubbed "the Camp Crusader."

Then, in 1986, writer-artist Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* dared to ask: What kind of person dresses up as a bat every night and pummels criminals? The answer: someone who's undoubtedly psychologically cracked and probably psychotic. Suddenly, the idea that not all superheroes wear capes – but an antihero *could* – became an intriguing pop-culture ideology. Because Batman's superpower isn't the ability to fly,

FROM LEFT: WARNER BROS./EVERETT COLLECTION; JONATHAN OLLEY/DC COMICS/WARNER BROS; 20TH CENTURY FOX FILM CORP./EVERETT COLLECTION; SIMON CHILD/NOUNPROJECT

From left: Christian Bale in *The Dark Knight Rises;* Robert Pattinson in 2022's *The Batman;* Adam West in TV's *Batman*.

or run fast, or talk to fish. It's that he has a pathology. He *must* put on the costume and fight. He's damaged goods who is trying to use that damage to do good.

Burton's *Batman* positions him as both a larger-than-life urban legend and the second coming of Travis Bickle, violent enough for thrill-seeking teens yet complex enough for chin-stroking adults. Throw in years of prefab brand recognition and you had yourself a marketable "edgy" hit. The whole template for neurotic, tortured screen superheroes and their popularity – we love you, Superman, but we've chosen darkness – starts here. And whenever Batman began to drift back into camp territory (two words: bat nipples), the franchise took a timeout before hitting a reset button and dragging the character back into the shadows where he belonged.

That, and to stop treating him like a bat-joke once and for all. It's why *Batman Begins,* the first of Christopher Nolan's game-changing trilogy, is closer to a bat-procedural than a superhero movie; Christian Bale doesn't even put on the mask until an hour in. *The Dark Knight* (2008), still considered the gold standard for the genre, may be best remembered for Heath Ledger's unhinged, unnerving take on the Joker, but it's also a morality tale about the queasy gray area that exists in the phrase "the ends justify the means."

Every decade gets the screen Batman it needs: West's millionaire-a-go-go and his teen sidekick run around bopping bad guys and keeping the '66 status quo intact as the American empire engaged in a cold war with Russia, an increasingly hotter war in Asia, and with internal strife at home. (It's all one big cartoonish adventure where the good guys win, kids! Trust us!) The 1980s Caped Crusader comes at the end of a decade when social inequity and urban paranoia had reached an all-time high, and Rambo and Bernhard Goetz were considered folk heroes. So it's not a coincidence that the idea of a villain who just wants to see the world burn would resonate several years after the worst terrorist attack on U.S. soil, or that a superhero would view a surveillance state as a necessity during a prolonged War on Terror.

By the time Bale hangs up the cape in *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012), the movies have made good on Wayne's assertion that "as a symbol…I can be everlasting." As a symbol and an intellectual property: Nolan's movies did more to enshrine Batman as a mythic figure and a perpetual moneymaker at the very moment that superhero movies became the last sure thing in Hollywood. The weariness, the raspy voice, the willingness to cross the line if it gets the job done – they're characteristics of the obsessive vigilante that we now view as Batman touchstones, period. He is our eternal avatar of bleak-buster escapism, which can be both a feature and a bug. It's why the "Batfleck" we see in Zack Snyder's earlier DCEU films feels so stifling; it's practically a parody of Dark Knight-hood. (You can imagine Snyder declaring, "Yeah, I could totally make him darker.")

But that's what makes Pattinson's welcome-to-the-black-parade iteration so potentially interesting. Pattinson's emo-volatile, beast-mode vibe, fighting a world that's falling apart, feels like an all-too-apt fit for our on-the-brink moment. ("He's got an inner kind of rage," Reeves said when asked what inspired him to go after the *Twilight* star for the role. "I can feel this desperation.") It may be the newest flavor of grim, but we're living in grim times. At his best, the Dark Knight rises to reflect the world happening outside the theaters and your screens. In 2022, this antihero has his work cut out for him. ®

BREAKING DOWN THE BATMEN

Adam West
1966-68
West hammed it up for two seasons of *Zap! Pow! Bam!*

Michael Keaton
1989-92
Fans protested, but Tim Burton knew exactly what he was doing when he cast the comic as the Caped Crusader.

Val Kilmer
1995
The *Top Gun* star's one-and-done gig in the Batsuit is a lot better than you remember.

George Clooney
1997
We forgive you, George.

Christian Bale
2005-12
The intense actor brought his Method-y madness to the role — and gave us an unforgettable Dark Knight.

Ben Affleck
2016-17
Batfleck had the right chin for the part — if only he'd been given better Bat-lines to say.

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[*Cont. from 25*] lation, Milwaukee and Dane, which were Democratic bastions and home to the vast majority of the state's minority voters. Those recounts confirmed Biden's victory. A post-election audit of the state's voting machines also found no evidence of wrongdoing. It was only then that a campaign of a different nature began.

RON HEUER is the president of Wisconsin Voter Alliance. A short, wiry man in his seventies, he looks like Dr. Anthony Fauci's better-looking brother, a comparison Heuer would resent given his dislike of Fauci. When I meet him for dinner in Green Bay on a frigid evening in January, he tells me to take my mask off, even as the omicron variant rips through the state. (In fairness, not another soul in the restaurant is wearing a mask, either.) Heuer worked as an executive in the tour wholesale business for decades, traveling the world and making a "great living." When he retired, he moved to Kewaunee County, Wisconsin, located on shores of Lake Michigan, and got involved in local Republican politics, taking over as the local GOP chairman.

In the fall of 2020, Heuer was contacted by a lawyer named Tim Griffin, who worked for a conservative law group in Chicago, the Thomas More Society, that defended pro-life activists and challenged orders that shut down churches during the pandemic. Griffin asked Heuer if he wanted to launch a new group focused on elections in Wisconsin. Heuer tells me he was no expert on the subject, so he started to read. "I'm one of those people who will drill down and do my research," he says. He also talked to the lawyer Erick Kaardal about the CTCL grants. (Kaardal did not respond to requests for comment.)

The more Heuer learned, he says, the more outraged he became. He read the June 2020 grant proposal by the five cities to CTCL asking for $6.3 million, highlighting the passages he found most troubling: "our strategies and plans to encourage and increase absentee voting"; "communities of color, senior voters, low-income voters"; and "Our five cities share the desire to assist as many residents as possible with casting ballots before Election Day." To Heuer, the document was a smoking gun, evidence that "Democrat cities" were using CTCL's money – "Zuckerbucks," he called it – to turn out Democratic voters and swing the election. When I tell him that a plain reading of the document gave me the impression that the cities wanted the money to help as many people vote as possible, he scoffs. "Don't be naive," he says. "They're using that money to accentuate the Black and Latino vote. When you're saying you're going to get the people of color out to vote, isn't that biased?"

Heuer and Kaardal filed an election-bribery lawsuit in September 2020; the case was dismissed. Undeterred, Heuer and Kaardal filed another suit in D.C. federal court seeking to block the election results in Wisconsin and four other states – a claim that a judge dismissed in a stinging opinion. Heuer's group also took aim at another target, the Wisconsin Elections Commission, arguing that the organization's guidance on voting in nursing homes broke the law. "They have no idea what they're doing," Heuer says of the commission, and he called its nonpartisan administrator, Meagan Wolfe, a "very dangerous person."

These allegations of fraud and wrongdoing started on the fringes in late 2020, stoked by activists like Heuer and lawyers like Kaardal. But in the chaotic aftermath of the election, as Trump and his lawyers searched for any legal argument or shred of evidence to keep him in office, Wisconsin Republicans seized on Heuer and Kaardal's arguments. Party leaders such as U.S. Sen. Ron Johnson, who had initially said the election was fair, now backed away from those proclamations. Janel Brandtjen, the new chairwoman of the state Assembly's campaigns and elections committee, invited Kaardal to testify at a March 2021 hearing and gave him a microphone to spread his baseless theories without the committee even hearing from the subjects of Kaardal's allegations. Brandtjen praised the witnesses for bringing to light potential wrongdoing in the election and called for further investigation by the Legislature.

Ben Ginsberg, a veteran election lawyer who worked for the Republican National Committee and several GOP presidential campaigns, says the legislators and activists taking issue with rule changes and outside grant funding needed to have done so before the election for their complaints to have merit. "The criticism of the WEC's decisions was something that could've been valid if they were raised at the time," he says. As for the CTCL money, Ginsberg says a more functional government would fund its elections so that private nonprofits didn't have to, but noted that no one has come forward with evidence that CTCL money made it possible for illegal voters to vote. "The allegation apparently is that you don't want all legal voters to vote, which is not a good place for a party to be," he says.

The evidence for a rigged election may have been nonexistent, but the budding election-fraud movement fomented the idea that the state needed to take action to stop voter fraud. While Republicans introduced legislation to crack down on drop boxes, Speaker Vos, who had urged his fellow Republicans to move on from the 2020 election, faced pressure from his base to launch an Arizona-style audit. Instead, he hired a former state Supreme Court justice, Michael Gableman, to run a special investigation into possible election crimes that would conclude by the end of October 2021. Gableman's choice raised some alarms: At a Trump rally in November 2020, he claimed the election was stolen, and went on to hire staffers for the investigation who had also amplified election-fraud misinformation. Documents show that Gableman and his team's investigation has ballooned into something far larger, sending expansive subpoenas to clerks and voting-machine companies, while threatening to jail mayors for refusing to sit for depositions about the 2020 election. Vos allocated $676,000 in taxpayer money to fund Gableman's investigation, but the final cost will likely run higher.

Charlie Sykes, a never-Trump conservative writer and former talk-show host in Wisconsin, says the Gableman investigation shows how Vos' attempts to appease his base have spiraled out of control. "He really thought he was going to be the guy who was going to grow the alligator in the bathtub and it wasn't going to bite him," Sykes says.

LAST FALL, the Republican campaign to challenge the integrity of the 2020 election turned to a new target: the Wisconsin Elections Commission. A review of the 2020 election by the state's Legislative Audit Bureau released in October turned into the next flashpoint in the battle over voting. The nonpartisan bureau concluded that the election was safe and secure, but also made dozens of recommendations about improvements needed. Republicans treated those suggestions as proof of incompetence or malfeasance by the commission.

Soon afterward, the sheriff of Racine County announced he had referred five of the six commissioners to the local district attorney for criminal charges over their 2020 directives about nursing-home voting. GOP legislators now demanded the resignations of administrator Wolfe, her deputy, and five of the six commissioners. The only commissioner not under scrutiny was Bob Spindell, a Republican appointee and party loyalist. (Spindell was also one of the 10 fake electors for Trump sent to D.C. by state Republicans.)

I meet with Wolfe in her office and ask about the campaign to make her step down. She has worked her entire career in elections, starting at the Government Accountability Board; in 2019, the Republican-led state Senate voted unanimously to confirm her as WEC administrator. In person, she comes across as a pure elections nerd, her laptop festooned with voting-themed stickers, her expression brightening when she talks about voter databases or the auditing of voting machines. As the nonpartisan chief of the Wisconsin Elections Commission, Wolfe implements the guidance of six board members and ensures the agency runs smoothly. She is a public servant, not a partisan operative, and she says that makes her a convenient target. "A lot of the things that people are upset about weren't my decision," she says.

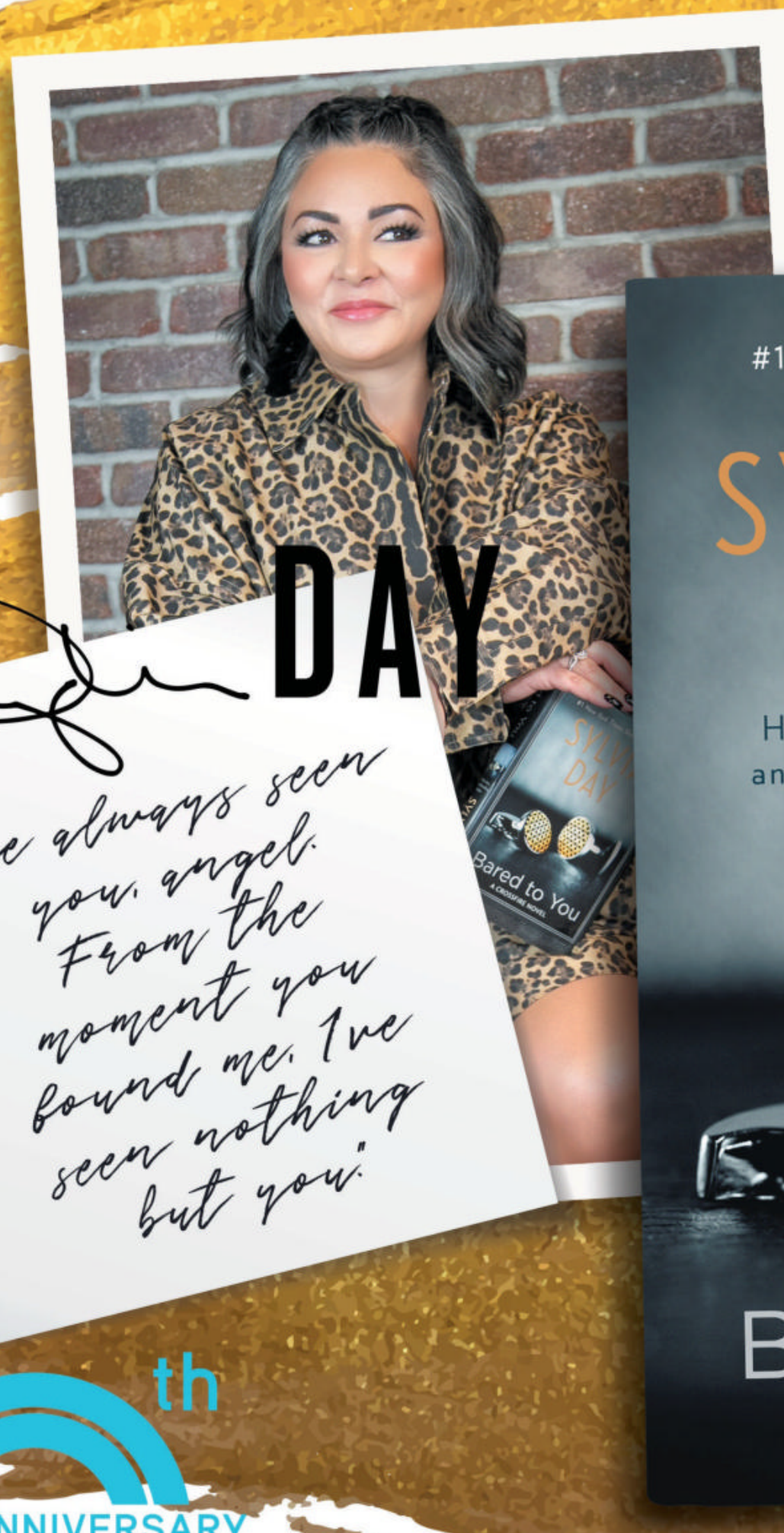
Still, she can't help but feel frustrated by the ire directed at the commission by Republicans, considering that it was Republicans who created the commission. "Our commission is operating exactly as it's designed under law. . . . These decisions had to be made in public meetings, by a bipartisan commission, with four votes," she says. "That's exactly what's happening." Now, the WEC has become a campaign bogeyman among Republicans, and two leading GOP candidates for governor have called for dissolving the WEC entirely.

Lawmakers and longtime political observers say they see the conservative push to change voting and punish election officials as part of a larger strategy to help win more seats in the 2022 midterms and create a more favorable environment in the next presidential race. If the GOP defeats Gov. Evers and holds onto its majorities in the Legislature, which it is expected to do thanks to heavy gerrymandering, then they can make all the changes they want to elections and voting. "This is an all-hands-on-deck moment here," Evers tells me. "If I weren't able to veto bills without the Republicans overriding my veto, we'd be Georgia right now. We'd be Texas. We'd be Arizona."

Wisconsin Republicans say they've heard from voters who are disgusted by the 2020 election, and plan to hold Democrats accountable. "There will be retribution down the road," state Rep. Brandtjen tells me in her office. There's an icy certainty in the way she says this that catches me off guard. What does she mean by that, I ask.

Brandtjen stares straight at me. "There'll be retribution for people because they don't think there's fair elections." She goes on, "You see what happens to countries when they don't think they have fair elections. Look at Venezuela. It falters the republic."

The threat to democracy in Wisconsin isn't coming from a lawless election commission, hacked voting machines, or illegal ballots coming out of nursing homes. It comes from a political party that united around suspicions and lies, and sought to bend reality to its will. Wisconsin is more than a laboratory for new policies and bold ideas; it's a trial for whether democracy can survive at all.



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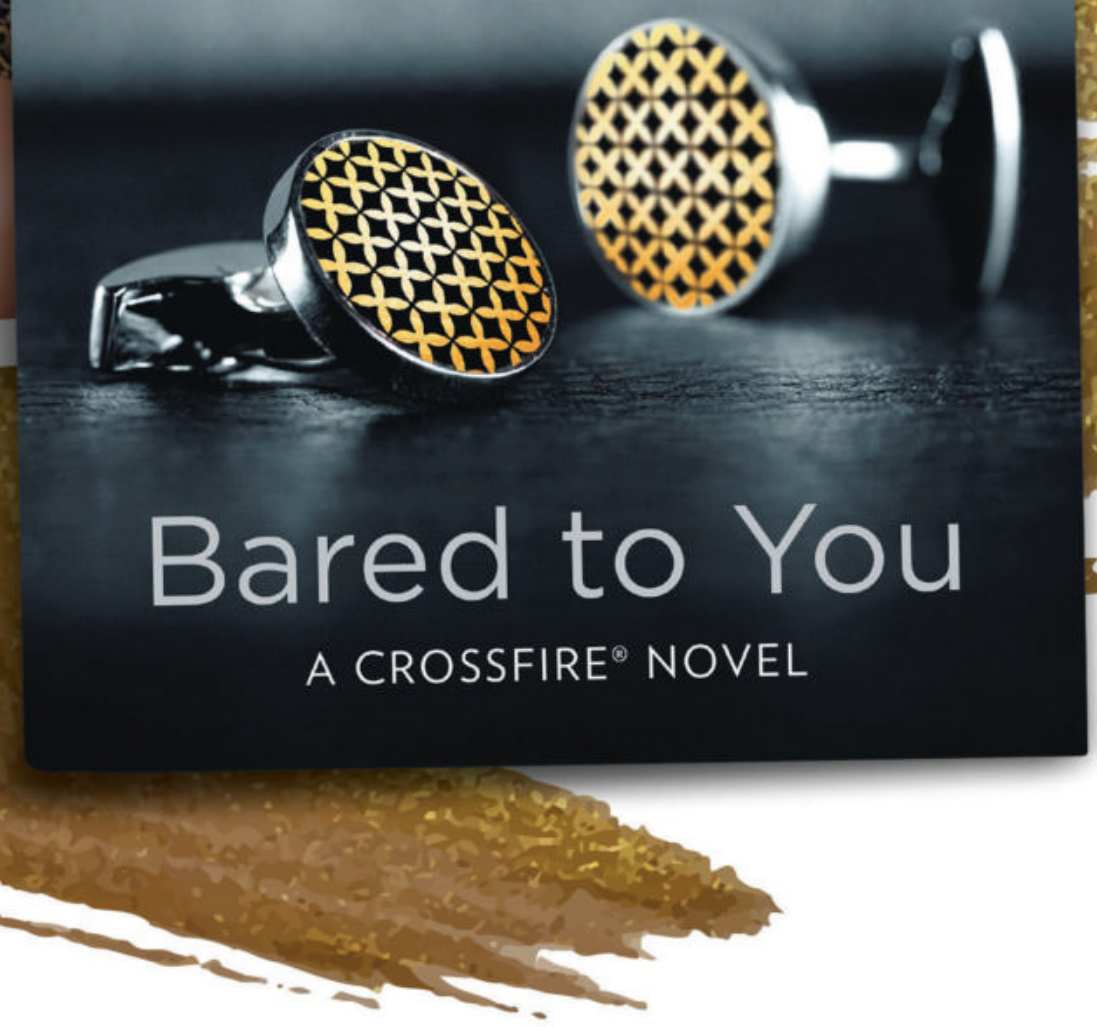

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SHEILA NEVINS

[*Cont. from 38*] the truth, which still stings, is that she was pushed out, a doyenne whose power came to be questioned and resented by the C-suite suits who signed her checks. She regrets that she didn't see it – too laser-focused on her work. She regrets that she didn't negotiate for a better package, like some of the men forced out before her reportedly got. She regrets maybe most of all that she never pushed decades earlier to just run the damn network herself.

"Why did these businesspeople and PR people run it?" she says, part apoplectic, part genuinely mystified. "Why didn't I think I could do it? I'd been a dancer at [New York's High School of] Performing Arts. I'd studied English at Barnard. Directing at Yale. I had all the fucking credentials that these schlemiels didn't have. So why the hell didn't I say 'What about me' when I was 45 or 50? There was no reason why I couldn't have done that."

It is somewhat startling to hear, given that Nevins is no stranger to a fight. She was a legendarily fierce advocate within HBO's halls, and she is feisty by both nature and nurture. She grew up in New York's East Village, the daughter of a Russian-immigrant father who ran numbers out of his job at the 33rd Street post office (he was known as "Benny P.O.") and a card-carrying Communist mother she calls "the most difficult woman you can imagine." Her father was in and out of jail, or off cavorting with his girlfriend, so aside from the occasional Dodgers game or trips to bail him out of the tombs, Nevins and her seven-years-younger sister, Vicki, rarely saw him. Her mother suffered from Raynaud's disease and scleroderma, autoimmune conditions that caused her to lose her limbs (first an arm, then eventually both legs before her death from complications of those diseases at 57) and turned a teenage Sheila into her primary caretaker.

As a Jewish girl who grew up poor, Nevins stuck out among the blue-blood masses at Yale, where she pursued her MFA. She fell in love with a law student there; at her first family dinner at his house, his WASP mother cruelly told her to find one of her own kind, a message that fueled Nevins' drive throughout her career. (There's a poem about it in her 2017 memoir, *You Don't Look Your Age and Other Fairy Tales*. It reads, in part: "Every trophy was for her. Every yes to me was a slap in her face.")

Her toughness got her through the "frat house" culture of HBO's infancy, as it's described by a former executive in *Tinder Box,* James Andrew Miller's gossip-filled tome about the network's explosive rise. But her workplace MO was less about trying to outman the men than outfox them. When they interrupted or talked over her, she talked louder. When the room got tense, she cracked a joke. And when she needed money for one of her movies, "I would come back until I annoyed people to death at what I wanted," she says. "I was a lie-in-wait person. I had deals with secretaries, who are always women. 'When is he free? What mood is he in? What are his appointments? What time is he leaving?' If you want something, it's always good to be there 10 minutes before somebody's leaving, he's going to want to get out and say yes just to get rid of me. And it doesn't matter, because their budget is 150 million and you want one. So they'll say, 'OK, do it. Yeah, go ahead. Sure.' "

In an era before that, Nevins wasn't above the colder calculations made by many women to get, well, not ahead, but anywhere. She's spoken and written openly about sleeping with the "big boss" at her first TV job in order to secure a spot as a P.A. on a film. She credits that project with launching her career, as it led her to work with a producer who brought her to PBS, and then CBS News, before she was poached for HBO. Asked if she feels sad that sex was the only route back then to a job she wanted, she practically howls, "No! Had I not gone in on that snow day and had I not fucked him in that chair . . . It meant nothing to me. Nothing. Zero." In some ways, she appreciated that the boundaries were clearer then. She says the moment she knew CBS News was going to let her stick around was when *60 Minutes* producer Don Hewitt came up behind her, lifted up her hair to tickle her neck, and told her, "You're cute."

"I'm sure today I would feel sad about a lot of things," she says. "I'd feel sad for being whistled at. I'd feel sad for being attractive. But I didn't feel it then, no. I didn't suffer that. I suffered my mother's disease. I suffered not having money. I suffered people's poverty and sadness. No man ever made me suffer except the one who broke my heart."

This is the Sheila Nevins who takes you by surprise. For all of her brass-tacks pragmatism and hard-won wisdom, for every battle she's weathered, Nevins' raw feelings are right on the surface. She doesn't hold grudges; she nurses open wounds. Her unceremonious departure from HBO – there was no fanfare, no thank-you from the management; she went in on the Friday after Thanksgiving and packed her desk alone – was a crushing blow made all the worse when no one checked in on her after she left. For six months, she says, she didn't get out of bed, and her phone barely rang: "Everybody that I had worked for, that had sucked up to me on the rooftop of the Peninsula, all the bullshitters, they weren't there. When you leave a job and you have a lot of power, suddenly you lose a lot of friends. They may not have ever been friends, but they liked you because you could give them something. So I learned a lot in that year about people." This is what she cares about more than any sexism she faced along the way, more than any amount of money she could have rightfully walked away with at the end. "The real hurt in the workplace is an emotional hurt, not a physical hurt," she says. "You can pinch my ass as much as you want, but if you hurt my gut, I won't recover it from it."

It is also what drives that nagging feeling that she's not truly successful. Early in her career, she was pushed to be on camera ("I was cursed by being good-looking," she says), but she had no interest. Her ambition was never to be the center of a story but to be a puppeteer. She wanted to be recognized by her peers as the one pulling the strings – and not just the purse strings. "It's knowing that I thought of that ending. Or I thought of that cut there," she says. "I wanted to get credit for what I had done."

About a year into her "retirement," Nevins did get a call, not from an old friend but a new one. Chris McCarthy, the president of MTV Entertainment, wanted to hire her to run its documentary division. Since signing on, she's brought in no fewer than four Oscar-hopeful films, two of which (the shorts *Coded: The Hidden Love of J.C. Leyendecker* and *Lynching Postcards*) have already been shortlisted.

Nevins was skeptical the day she took McCarthy's call. She asked why he wanted her, when, in her words, "I could be your great-grandmother." He replied, "Your shows helped me be gay." Her eyes soften as she recalls the moment. "That was the nicest thing anyone had said to me in 50 years of working," she says. "I've not really seen him since then. Nonetheless, we did have an emotional moment. A corporate emotional moment is to be treasured, like winning the lottery. And they hired me."

For the second time, she unfurls a Cheshire grin. Sheila Nevins won't die tonight, not even close. She'll keep working as long as there are stories to tell.

MEAT LOAF

[*Cont. from 59*] **Did you have a backup plan if *Bat Out of Hell* didn't work?**

I didn't need one. I knew what we had. Listen, the first show, they said to me, "Who do you want to open for?" I said, "I'm not an opening act." Nobody would want me to open for them. Not even Springsteen. I mean he's great, got a great show, and there are only two or three people who have really great shows. ROLLING STONE started the thing where we stole everything from Springsteen and that *Bat Out of Hell* was nothing but our rehash of *Born to Run*.

Oh, come on. Really?

That's what they said. And I'm going, where does Springsteen have a "Two Out of Three"? Where does he have a "Crying Out Loud"? Where does he have a "Paradise"? The only thing that is close to Springsteen is the first verse out of "Bat Out of Hell." And Jimmy had already written the first verse before "Born to Run" was ever released.

What happened with the follow-up?

For us, success was a lot harder to deal with than failure. When *Bat Out of Hell* broke big, I had a nervous breakdown. I lost my voice when I was working on the next record. And I felt abandoned by Jim at that moment.

It took years for you guys to make peace.

Jim and I got back together in 1984. I was recording for RCA at the Power Station. Jim was working on something there, and we started hanging out. Jim said, "I think it's time we did another record." It took us until 1993, but that's OK. Look how long it took us to do *Bat Out of Hell*. When the second one was done, the label was like, "Great, 'Rock and Roll Dreams Come Through' is the single." We turned around and said, "No, that's not the single. Are you nuts? 'I Would Do Anything for Love' is the single." It took a lot of arguing to get them to agree.

What was your relationship like in the final years of Jim's life?

As he got sicker, he turned to me more and more. I kept wanting to go see him, but he'd be in the hospital for a surgery or I'd be on the road. I was always on the road because I never got any royalties. Only in the last few years, when my health took a dive, did I go see Jim. When we got together, I made him happy. I made him laugh. His nurse would call and I'd talk to him via FaceTime during Covid. His brain was there. He was trapped inside a body. He held it together. But it was hard because he was so weak.

After he died, his nurse, Mary Beth, left a message saying how much he loved me. She said I was the person he needed more than anyone else. I don't want to die, but I may die this year because of Jim. I'm always with him, and he's right here with me now.

[*Cont. from 67*] violated rules against transporting chemical weapons. (They weren't transporting weapons, the team reasoned, the ship would be a chemical-weapons-destruction facility and there were no rules pertaining to a floating facility of that kind.)

In the meantime, there was still a considerable amount of "squabbling" going on among senior government officials. "It's a very tight group, but with a lot of disagreements," Limage says. Once it was decided that the destruction would, in fact, take place on a ship, the State Department wanted one outfitted with an incinerator, rather than the Edgewood chemists' machines considered for the job.

Limage remembers the matter coming to a head at a meeting inside the State Department. The room was hot, every seat at the conference table was full, and more folks were lined up along the walls when she slipped into the conference room. "It was a disaster of a meeting," she remembers. The State Department contractor brought in to pitch the idea was pelted with a stream of pointed questions from DOD officials – some plucked from a document prepared by Goldstein and Limage – while Army chemists had their own set of holes to poke in the proposal.

"It was a lot of people who had in-depth knowledge of the *Cape Ray* option, asking very hard questions to, essentially, one man from some private company who was not equipped to be answering them," Limage says. "And there was this poor guy in the middle, trying to control the crowd."

(That "poor guy": the deputy assistant secretary for nonproliferation programs, a man named Simon Limage. As it turned out, Julia Limage, née Brown, did not slip into the room as discreetly as she imagined. "He claims that he was in the middle of this meeting that was going completely sideways and this beautiful young woman walks in and totally distracts him," she says. The couple later married, and now share two young children.) If there was an upshot, though, it was that by the end of the interrogation, everyone seemed to agree that the merchant ship, the *MV Cape Ray,* was the best available option.

Or nearly everyone. In December, an Office of Naval Intelligence report that issued further warnings against the idea began circulating in the highest echelons of government. "Their basic premise was 'Landing an airplane on land is hard enough. Landing on a ship is 10 times harder. Everything on the ocean is harder, and you haven't factored that in. This is never going to work, and you're all going to die,' " Santee says.

By that point, contractors had been dispatched to Portsmouth, where they were working to retrofit the 648-foot *Cape Ray* with pumps, hoses, 2,200-gallon titanium barrels, containers to hold the neutralizing agents and the toxic byproduct, hazmat suits, and other accouterments required for the mission. There was only a matter of weeks in which to do it all before the ship would embark for the Mediterranean.

For three frigid weeks after Christmas 2013, Limage stayed at a dingy Hampton Inn near the shipyard in Virginia, acting as conduit between policymakers in D.C. and contractors rushing to meet their deadlines. The sudden appearance of a perky young lady peppering them with questions perplexed the contractors, chemists, and security personnel. Some "were definitely confused by my existence. I remember the military guys being like, 'Who's this little girl on the ship?' They didn't know what to make of me."

She remembers walking into the shipyard that first day, dwarfed by stacks of shipping containers and the pallets she'd requisitioned. "I'd been thinking about shipping containers and forklifts and trucks all day, but it was very much a paperwork drill for me," she says, "All of a sudden: This is what we're talking about. I really understood."

At the same time, pitfalls the team hadn't anticipated were becoming real, too. There was a polar vortex that year, and as the temperatures dropped in Virginia, PVC pipes on the ship burst, pushing departure further back. The delays prompted questions about how the temperatures aboard the ship would impact the order in which the weapons would be disposed of. "We were getting towards summer. We weren't supposed to be destroying in summer. What happens when this stuff gets really hot?" There were similar problems if, for some reason, it happened to be too cold: Sulfur mustard has a freezing point of 58 degrees, and if it were frozen, it couldn't be processed by the hydrolysis machine.

Finally, as the last bolts were put in place and the boat was ready to embark, there was one last query. Like the others, it appeared in the form of an email on Limage's worn, government-issue Blackberry: *Julia, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs would like to know who is going to certify the ship?* "I was like, 'What does that mean? How do you certify?' " Limage recalls.

Someone needed to guarantee that the ship, and all of its unprecedented modifications, was fit for duty. Normally, the relevant division of the armed services would be the one responsible for certifying the vessel, but as in the early days, suddenly no one wanted the responsibility of putting their neck on the line. Ultimately, the buck was passed all the way to the top: Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel himself signed the paperwork, and on Jan. 10, 2014, the boat departed Virginia.

There would be more delays getting the weapons out of Syria, tracking each barrel as it made its way across the country and figuring out a plan to decontaminate the ship once it returned to port, but by July the chemical agents had been loaded aboard the *Cape Ray* and the process of neutralizing 600 of the 1,200 metric tons extracted from Syria had begun.

"Once the destruction operation started, Eucom took over and everything went black," Limage says. "All of a sudden, we didn't get any information. Our part had basically concluded." At the same time, there were reports from West Africa of a new emerging threat: a rare hemorrhagic fever that sent patients into multiple-organ failure. A new team at DTRA was being stood up to respond to the Ebola outbreak, and both Goldstein and Limage were pulled onto it.

THE DESTRUCTION OF Syria's declared stockpile was completed on Aug. 18, 2014, and the *MV Cape Ray* began making its way back to Virginia to be swabbed down and disinfected. But on Aug. 19, the Assad regime launched a chlorine attack on Daraa. On Aug. 20, Damascus was hit; villages in the countryside outside the capital on Aug. 22.

The ongoing attacks were demoralizing, Cinnamon says. "You're heartbroken. You see images you never wanted to see again, after what should've been a jubilant celebration: We finally got this stuff taken care of, and we did something that no one said could be done. . . . 'Nothing I did really mattered,' that's what goes through your mind," he says, glumly.

Eight days after the 2013 chemical attacks on Ghouta and Moadamiyat al-Sham – the ones that triggered the international response – Ameenah Sawwan was at a wedding. The bride's grandmother insisted on moving up the date; if she was going to die, she wanted to know that her granddaughter would be taken care of. During the reception, the wedding party could hear a pair of mortar shells exploding in the distance. "I remember we were saying, 'I hope that nobody was harmed leaving the wedding.' " Later that night, Sawwan learned those mortar shells killed her brother, his wife, and their son. They'd survived the chemical attack, only to be killed by a conventional bomb a week later.

A recent U.N. report identified at least 350,209 individuals killed since the start of the Syrian civil war. The overwhelming majority of those deaths were by conventional means, rather than chemical ones.

The Obama administration didn't roll out a billowing "Mission Accomplished" banner when the chemical destruction was finished – or mark the success in any meaningful public way. And it's understandable why they might not have felt comfortable patting themselves on the back: Assad was continuing to attack Syrian civilians. The Islamic State had captured the Syrian city of Raqqa. Russia, the diplomatic partner that brokered the deal, had invaded Ukraine.

"There was this huge buildup of this huge, amazing mission," Limage recalls. "But then you really couldn't celebrate or even talk about it because of these horrible things. It was hard."

In September, one year after she'd been tapped to join the Syria team, Julia Limage returned to Portsmouth for a small, commemorative ceremony. The ship was empty, quiet, the hydrolysis machines had been dismantled. All that hung in the air was the strong stench of bug spray. *They were using that on people*, she remembers thinking.

By that time, most of the team had scattered. Santee had retired from the Air Force a few months earlier. Cinnamon was rotated out to his next military posting. (He now works in the private sector.) Goldstein returned to the Department of Defense, and Limage moved on to a job at the Department of Homeland Security. (She and Simon recently welcomed their second child together.)

MacAulay and her husband retired from the military. The Air Force had made it hard for the couple to be assigned to the same place. "The system was not built for dual-military families," she says. Policies were starting to shift, but they "weren't shifting fast enough," she says.

Even Schoenberger, who first suggested the ship option, vetted the idea, and tracked down the vessel, didn't get internal accolades, according to Santee. "One of the last things I had to do was tell her she didn't get promoted as I'm leaving the Air Force," Santee says, adding that he wrote a memo telling the folks in charge to "get their heads on straight." (Schoenberger is still in the military. She can't discuss the work she does these days, but she has since been promoted – twice.)

A few of the merchant marines, and the Edgewood chemists, and some Obama officials would go on road shows, giving presentations about the mission, but the four women who were there from the beginning didn't. "We didn't get the flashy stuff. We weren't on the news. We weren't on the boat, getting all the credit and the hero's welcome when they came home," MacAulay says. But, she admits, that's the way these things often go. "Most people only applaud the pilot who dropped the bomb, or the pilot who rescued someone. The maintainers – all of the people that enabled that airplane to get into the air to do what it did – those people never get credit."

Marisa Tomei

The actor on nude scenes, playing moms, and the tao of Spider-Man

Why do you think this latest Spider-Man movie has been so insanely popular?
It's a cathartic film because there's so much about healing in it. And it's caught this moment in time: How can we reweave ourselves? I guess that was a spider pun, not even intended [*laughs*]. But I guess that is the essence of it – taking those kinds of franchises from a mindset of "us and them" to a concept of healing. That's all super subliminal, but I do think that's resonating.

> ***Oscar winner Tomei recently appeared in 'Spider-Man: No Way Home.'***

The biggest secret in the lead-up to the movie was the return of Tobey McGuire and Andrew Garfield. How hard was it to keep quiet?
It's an exercise in boundaries, which I welcome. Because you really have to say to people, "I really can't tell you, and you can't ask me." But it's a good tease, too. It's a fun little nugget.

***My Cousin Vinny* turns 30 this month. If you're flipping the channels and you see it's on, do you watch it?**
I have actually never caught it. I guess I'm on the wrong channel. But I do have some of my older aunties who tell me, "It was on! I hope you're getting your residuals!"

Did getting the Oscar for Best Supporting Actress change your life?
Well, I got to work. I got to work in films after knocking at the door for what felt like an eternity for the first half of my twenties.

Do you have your Oscar anywhere in your house?
I don't. . . . I put money on it being at my mom's, but the thing is, I actually haven't seen it at her house. Let me send a quick text. I'm texting my mom right now. . . . Oh, OK. My mom says yes: "I just saw him yesterday, moved him to the closet." I didn't know that she was on a friendly basis.

What advice do you wish you could give your younger self?
Meditate more. The pandemic certainly brought up my percentages. . . . It puts me more in touch with my heart. Time – the urgency and the grind – becomes less the thing that's pushing me.

Do you think progress has been made for women in Hollywood?
It's certainly shifting. I get inspired when I see Fran McDormand, Jean Smart, Reese Witherspoon, and people changing the rules of what exists of our time limit that we were supposed to have before.

You received a lot of praise later in your career for *Before the Devil Knows You're Dead* and *The Wrestler,* films where you appeared nude. Did you feel like a sex symbol?
No. When I did *The Wrestler,* I was like, "What the hell am I doing?" When I was younger, I thought, "No, don't." . . . It really was something to stay away from if you want to show that you were a serious actress. And then that came around at the age of, what was I, 43? And I thought, "Now? Really, now?" But I had my legs under me and I thought I would be more able to handle something like that, although, physically, I was terrified. But then I was pleasantly surprised to find that the old bod was still there and I was up to it. Doing it later in life, it was the opposite of when you do it younger, because it brings a certain kind of cred in a way. It was an interesting reaction.

You played Pete Davidson's mom in *The King of Staten Island*. What was that like?
I actually just was talking to Pete today, because I was like, "I never got paid for that. Did you? In this age of transparency, can we talk?" But despite that, I had a rollicking good time. [With director] Judd [Apatow]'s approach to improv – which is extensive – I was intimidated. I'm with all these stand-ups. It was so freeing. Really changed how I approach each character going forward.

Besides *In the Bedroom,* was this your first time playing the role of a mom?
Let's say yes, because I want it to be [*laughs*]. I love that that's perhaps the truth.

Even though you played his mom, do you get the whole Pete Davidson "thing"?
He's just so fucking real, and he's unfiltered, but very sensitive. So he's almost an irresistible combination. And he's good-looking, even though I played . . . let's just put the mom thing aside. Let's, like, never mention that again. ANGIE MARTOCCIO

ILLUSTRATION BY **Mark Summers**

RAQUEL KIARAA

Rise Up, Defy Odds
Alongside ***Empowered Woman,***
Raquel Kiaraa

"We are women – Defying Odds.
I am a woman – Defying Odds."

Andrea Hunter Photography

She is listening,
She hears you,
'Defying Odds' stands to encourage humanity to reclaim and own their power.

In a world overshadowed by chaos, hopelessness, depression, anxiety, the voice of Raquel Kiaraa, author, and songstress, is listening and hearing you, empowering hope through her music and message. Destiny and fate are, but illusions shattered dreams obstacles, sings Raquel.

Yet, in her lyrics, the hearer is encouraged to move beyond our greatest challenges to see individual gifts and purpose.

This artist knows the cruelty of life's obstacles, and choosing to live into her dreams connects with her soul's true reflection. Music is the vessel we bring to our lips, harnessing all the energy of the universe meticulously choreographed in her latest music video release "Sweet Memory." There is urgency in the poetry set to the music, a message that comes during a time of uncertainty, for all to cry "Give me the legs lord to stand tall," a call, needed more than ever, to be your authentic self.

The video features the character of a bird of prey; the imagery is deliberate, portraying a woman whose wings are clipped by society's constrictive rules. Still, she defies the odds and soars to her ultimate goal. The lyrics, simple yet powerful, remind us that we are worthy of rising through our most complex challenges; they do not define us; instead, they inspire us to move into a person more potent because we fought through them.

We have accepted that fear and darkness are a part of life, death and rebirth, part of our "Phoenix Rising' from the ashes story. Fly high, she calls; find yourself once again. "Sweet Memory" captures our inner call to ignite our fire, opening our wings to reclaim our power.

Dedicated to "Defying Odds" in her latest album, the accolades are deserved; more importantly, it is the inspiration for her audience to realize their unique gifts, earning a place in the stars.

If ever we needed a Northern Star, it is now for everyone to choose who and what they were meant to be. Rise up on the strength of one voice to Defy Odds in the face of judgment, self-doubt, rage, anger, disappointment, fear, and heartbreak.

Rise to the beat of one voice who has travelled this road: Raquel Kiaraa writes, sings, agonizes, and leads, with power seething through her bones.

SAY HELLO TO SPRING

Bring on spring with brighter days and refreshed routines. Find Starbucks® spring coffees where you buy groceries.

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